WRITER

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10th Anniversary Rewrite

Daughter of Time, Book 2

EREC STEBBINS

Only one thing is impossible for God: to find any sense in any copyright law on the planet.—Mark Twain

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ISBN 978-1-942360-64-3

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To SG

A Note on This Edition

It has now been ten years since the original publication of my *Daughter of Time* trilogy. Of all my writings, this series is the most important to me in nearly every aspect of a novel that might matter: plot, ideas, themes, characters, and writing. Unlike my thrillers, which were written strongly to match what I understood of the expectations of the genre, I had allowed myself a lot more creative license with *Reader*, *Writer*, and *Maker* (especially *Maker*).

In this edition, I have undertaken a rewrite based on approaches I developed with my thrillers over the years. This approach tightens text considerably, and would often trim 10% of a book's words without altering a scene. Producing text that was leaner and more driving seemed to fit the thriller genre's expectations, but I was hesitant to apply it to the *Daughter of Time* series as I felt I might lose some of that wilder creativity by taking this editing machete to the project.

In the end, I created a hybrid method where I went through the many procedural steps in "trimming the fat" I'd used previously, but in the process of rewriting also allowed myself to let my

imagination run more freely. I was able to remove twenty-five thousand words from the series (10%) and even add an additional chapter.

I hope readers enjoy this new edition, whether encountering the story for the first time or returning to it after many years for a fresh perspective.

Erec Stebbins

December, 2025

When one being comes to know and love another, a new and beautiful thing is created, namely the love. The cosmos is thus far and at that date enhanced.

Olaf Stapledon, Last and First Men

Prologue

I have seen a face whose sheen I could look through to the ugliness beneath, and a face whose sheen I had to lift to see how beautiful it was.

"The Madman" by Kahlil Gibran

How do you make love to a goddess?

Is this a myth? Yes, maybe it is. Or rather, the beginning of one. Where the facts and hopes and dreams, the malignant madnesses of humanity and our maniacal desperations fling the fantasy of the past and future like child's clay. Perhaps it's the dawn of a legend. The birth of a new divine. After all that has happened, all I've seen, I understand why it may seem so.

I come from a land where religion soaks our soil. Where one thousand ragas encompass every possible mood and expression of our species. Where manifold theologies were born, copulated, and recombined like genomes to produce monotheists, polytheists, thirty-three and ten million divines with the number zero. Where

the adventures of gods and goddesses never ended. A child had no need of modern gods, the superheroes. With charming Krishna, dancing Shiva, and beautiful Parvati, stories uncounted awaited.

It's no mystery we so easily worshipped her. The real wonder is that all do. All nations across this blue-and-white marble pulled from the ashes.

Even these monstrosities, aliens positioned over our globe with godlike technologies and cities, they hold her in awe. In the erased fragments of time, a shattered world she made whole. The Dram tyranny trembles throughout the galaxy as her influence sweeps outward. It's a tide washing clean a tainted shore. She communes with the Orbs, summons their power, opens their portals. She is a cosmic messiah, writing anew the story of our universe.

But not to me.

As the soft morning sunlight of New Earth dances through our bedroom window, I gaze on her sleeping. The white sheets are blinding, wrapped around her seductive curves. Her naked shoulder has slipped from the fabric, as scintillating as the silk—such a contrast to my dark copper. Waterfalls of red curls streaming to her waist color this blank canvas.

She is beautiful enough to be a goddess.

But *goddess* is far too frail a word. She may be all those things that launched a thousand cults. I do not care. She is my woman. My lover. My dearest, Ambra Dawn.

I was born to love her. I know this from my heartbeat to the deep ache in my bones. It was my destiny, enabled by the miracle of her powers, incarnate when she turned the first Dram fleets to dust.

Had she been a normal woman, we would have never met. Never loved. Never walked hand in hand over the sands of the Sahara in a crimson sunset. Never made love on a distant world

overlooking the colossus of our own galaxy, as it painted the night sky like a frozen explosion.

But Ambra is no normal woman, and I, no normal man. I am abnormal in the ways I knew from childhood. Now, in this tragic darkness at the end, I see that my abnormality is deeper than could ever have been suspected. I cannot help it. It is not my doing. Can we who are sculpted from the dust and the clay reshape our makers?

I admire her swollen skull resting on the pillow. The grotesque bulge repulses others, but I know attraction, a pull to touch, to caress. Her Writer powers churn there, buried in the benign tumor that has changed the fate of the universe. It gives her insight into the inner workings of space and time. Access to the minds of any she chooses to probe.

This every schoolchild knows, but it doesn't explain my childhood obsession with her deformed, beautiful head. How I melt to see those sensual scarlet locks. They stop two-thirds of the way up her scalp, where her skin shines white and scarred. Hair removed by countless surgeries from a time long past when she lived in bondage and pain.

I pause, dwelling on the artificial bone surrounding the grapefruit-sized bulge. A synthetic casing, sculpted, implanted by twisted scientists in thralldom to the Dram. The brain tissue inside perverted to feed the tumor until it gestated beyond prediction. It gave her a sixth sense but stole from her the ability to see, leaving her blind with healthy eyes.

My Ambra's bright-green eyes see nothing. Yet, they see everything. They haunt the corridors of time.

Other schoolmates learned the story of New Earth's Mother by rote. I plunged my mind into the codified years like a warm sea. Her parents' death at the hands of monsters. Her abuse, deformation, torture. The escape with the help of the angelic Xix. Her

turning back the Dram empire. Of time itself. I took them deep into the core of my consciousness.

There, she impaled my heart. I memorized every event. Each line on her unchanging face from countless holographs. The lilt and tone and nuance of her voice in audio recordings. Before I had the hormones to be in love, I adored Ambra Dawn as no man, no human, no saintly Xixian has ever loved another. In the truest sense, I had no choice. At this terrible end, I see the inevitability of it.

And so now, as I walk to the nightstand and open the drawer, it is in a state of unreal detachment that I remove the firearm. The composite metal should be cold in my hand, but it is not. I feel nothing. The muscles tighten around the handle of the pistol, but I give no commands. I have no responses and sense no contractions or tightness in my skin. I see from a distance, crammed into a vantage point I cannot define in space or in time.

And this automaton, an alien form that is no longer mine, works the weapon. Fingers unlock the safety, orienting the firearm toward the bed. The golem raises the barrel to the elongated head of my beloved. It brushes the scarred edges near her hairline.

She opens her blind, green eyes with adoration. Seeing nothing and everything, they stare into my own. Tears trickle down her white cheeks and I hear her voice in my mind.

Don't be afraid, Nitin. I love you.

I pull the trigger.

Part I

And I saw a new Heaven and a New Earth:
for the first heaven and the first earth
were passed away.

Apocalypse of John

Chapter 1

Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear—not absence of fear.

Mark Twain

Without warning, the HUD pixelated, froze, and went dark. The view screen was blank. I was screwed.

I thought I heard a popping sound from my headset, but I couldn't be sure. No time remained for diagnostics. Three alien sandworms were bearing down on my team, and now I was blind.

"Control, this is MECHcore Lieutenant Nitin Ratava reporting emergency tactical failure! Display and all telemetry are down. Repeat: Enhanced combat mode is down."

A heartbeat of static.

"Roger that. Situation critical." An American voice. It would be the new instructor. "The drill's live, son, and those captured Dram don't know time out. Switch to manual. Continue theater." Another pause. "Life through action!"

Life through action. Our motto. Also the best advice for me in the middle of the Thar without backup and with real bugs bearing down on us. I was going to need *a lot* of action.

"Ratava, got your position. We'll try to draw hostiles until you can engage. Thirty seconds, max. Get rolling, metalhead!"

Suresh. The team would turn to him if I didn't make it out of this, which I likely wouldn't. I was sure there were examples of soldiers whose suits shorted out on them and who made it through a triad. I just hadn't heard of any.

Triads were a nightmare. The Dram's smallest infantry modules, they excelled at search and destroy. Three bugs per worm and three worms per group. The sandworms were a cross between a hovercraft tank and a flying drill bit. They bored under the sand, flew over it, accelerating faster than your eyes could track.

The real danger came from the firepower. The beam weapons usually weren't our worry—too much energy. They wouldn't risk draining their power source unless they had a clear kill or were sure of victory.

It was the flechettes striking fear into our hearts. Two hundred years of war on the surfaces of a thousand planets and moons, those cannons wrecked our most fortified attack units. Our armor couldn't stop them. A bed of nails would be comfortable compared to being filleted alive by those things.

Thank Dawn, the hydraulics still functioned. I rolled onto my back. The thick metal of the combat chassis scraped across the sands like marble over sandpaper. A tug in my stomach from acceleration, and I slid down the dune. At least I was on the right side, and this would hide me from the coming Dram for a few moments.

I slowed my breathing and focused to remember my MECHcore training. It wasn't often a suit failed like this, but it was something we all had to prepare for. Reaching over my head, I felt with the nanofiber

gloves and located the control box. Muscle memory of a hundred drills took over. I disengaged the digital controller and flipped the latchkey to manual. The plasma screen rolled back to reveal the glass faceplate.

Light flashed, blinding me. My eyes adjusted, and the swirling sands of the Thar came into focus. That and black smoke rising from the other side of the dune.

Static broke out on my communicator. Suresh's voice strained over explosions and cries of other MECHcore infantry.

"Sandworms engaged! Repeat, engaging triad. Sergeant Suresh Murli for Lieutenant Ratava. Commencing dance!"

The Xixian Dance Maneuver. Programmed into each of our suits, it confused the bug AI. It was our best tactic for defeating them. The soldiers were carried along in the stochastic pattern, firing weapons and dropping out if targeted. It had a seventy-seven percent success rate from our trials. If all went well, the Dram would die.

All wasn't going well.

I lurched to my feet and charged up the dune toward the sounds of battle. The thunder of flechette cannons, crackle of Xixian ion guns, cries and static over the COM. The cacophony assaulted me as I crested the sand. Below me, the dance was on. Two worms were down, plowed into the ground and burning.

The third had found a node, and my team had entered the nightmare. The random-walk sequence sometimes had holes preventing us from engaging the target. Angles were wrong. Friendly fire was a real danger. The node exposed us, and the speed took human reaction out of the picture. Already I could see two suits down. Light glinted from thousands of silver needles embedded in the MECHs' armor. Whoever was inside those units was dead, sliced into hundreds of pieces.

"This is Command! You're in a death node, Sergeant! Break and reinitiate dance!"

No time! We could lose most of the team to the remaining worm. I had to do something.

I charged down the dune, firing up my ion slingers. Halfway down, I launched my two shoulder-mounted rockets. It was a pretty hopeless tactic. Without telemetry or computer to parse the blurred darting of the bugs and the soldiers, I risked their lives as much as I chanced a strike on the Dram. But hitting them wasn't my goal. I needed to throw a wrench into their AI, sop up some critical processing power. A surprise attack from nowhere before they could lock onto any more of my team.

I sure as hell got their attention.

The next thing I knew, I was airborne. A thunderclap of superheated air exploded behind me. Their beam weapon just missed melting me into the mech. The shock wave and my dash down the dune propelled me toward the worm. Crazy instinct took over.

Tucking, I somersaulted near the bottom of the hill. The impact crushed the wind out of me through the suit. I planted my feet at the end of the roll, felt the hydraulics engage, and channeled the momentum into a leap. The combination took me over ten meters into the air. Flechette needles whistled behind me as the bugs adjusted to my unorthodox attack. I plunged, firing the small positional thrusters. Intended for more controlled maneuvers—floating over chasms, jumping over obstacles—it wasn't much. Enough to steer me onto the craft itself.

Or rather, *crash* me on it. As I dove, I fired several pulses into the bulk of the thing. I lost consciousness, slamming into the outer casing, coming to with the sounds of my COM screaming in my ear.

"Ratava! What the hell are you doing? Get off that boat!"

My face shield cracked, and I tasted soot. Sand spun like some demonic tornado. My hands grasped the edges of the metal blown apart by my ion blasts. The worm careened to the side, enemy

navigation disoriented, flechette cannons spraying at dunes. Now was the time.

"Reform the dance, Sergeant! Low complexity! Dance, dance, dance!"

They listened. The remaining platoon synced and jetted through another set of randomized movements. The bugs reoriented, the Dram recovering. Thank Dawn, they were too late.

"Lieutenant, abandon the vehicle!" barked Command. "They can't engage with you on it."

"Hell they can't!" I yelled. "Suresh, blast this thing back to Naraka."

"Ratava..."

"Do it! Fore and aft! Before you lose the chance!"

I'll get lucky in the middle.

The ship shuddered as the ion shots slammed into the hull. They did as I asked, centering on the front and back. Now, I would complete the job. I detached two plasgrens from the suit's side and engaged the magnets. The grenades leaped away, smashing into the sides of their armor.

"Poppers locked and activated! Everyone clear!"

The dancing MECHs broke formation, blasting away from the sandworm. I did the same, but without telemetry, I had to rely on pure guesswork.

A manual burn in the adrenaline rush of combat, where time was as distorted as it was around the Daughter? A recipe for putting your suit in orbit or through a canyon wall. G-forces yanked my stomach through my feet. My mind blanked in the pressure. I heard the deafening explosions of the plasma grenades. The hull-breached worm wasn't going to survive their discharge. I jerked my attention to the ground rushing to greet me.

My mech plummeted. Way too fast. I had one shot before impact: to counterfire the front thrusters. *Without AI.* I hit them

for a full burn. Too much, but I'd gain a little height and pray the next bounce wouldn't be so bad.

I was right about the first and punished for the second. The rockets fired and drained. My momentum stopped in a snap, reversed, and threw me thirty meters up. Gravity took over. I had nothing left to stop it.

I smashed onto the desert floor.

Chapter 2

Not the wind, not the flag; mind is moving.

Kōan 29, The Gateless Gate

I trembled in the middle of a cornfield.

My legs staggered, the smell of the earth and thick growth overpowering. Time bent, slowed, and melted. I gawked over an expanse of shoots blasting into a blue sky. Bright-green leaves sprouted from nodes in the stems. Husks hung, plump and pregnant. They perched, ready to release an avalanche of seed to submerge the world.

Dizzy, I swayed, bracing on one of the nearby stalks. The hard stem provided support as I steadied myself. Ragged breaths chopped from my mouth, staccato. I fought hyperventilation, inhaling in short spurts, exhaling from my diaphragm.

Where was I?

The heavens and corn gave no answer. In the distance, a massive black bird squawked.

I walked without a plan. The heated air under the sun

simmered like a sauna. I stumbled through the field of tasseled giants, but I never circled. Never redoubled my position. A soft pull led me forward, coaxing me in silence. Turn ninety degrees at this point. No backtracking here. From nowhere and everywhere, I felt a gentle *guide*.

The soil was moist from frequent irrigation. I blinked to see bare feet, my toes squelching the mud where water pooled.

I'm completely naked.

Part of my awareness, some distant chamber of my mind, whispered I was dreaming. For the rest of me, it was real.

I broke out of the corn ranks and stepped onto a manicured lawn. A small farmhouse rested across a glowing patch of grass. A cool breeze stirred, causing the stalks to whisper behind me.

A tall, lanky man stood in the middle of the yard. He'd buried his hair underneath a broad hat. The sun reddened his pale skin. His back to me, he crouched and lifted a bundle in his hands, which he threw into the air. A burst of laughter washed over the green. A crimson comet rose into the sky and fell back into his arms. Over and again, he tossed the child, and with each flight the little one squealed.

I stepped forward in a trance. The farmer spun and furrowed his brows. A little girl pressed his hands with impatience.

"Daddy, Daddy, down. Put me down. *He's* here!"

Her father acquiesced, confusion and surprise on his face. She turned her glowing green eyes to me and approached. Scarlet strands swirled around her head in the breeze. She smiled.

"Nitin."

The call of my name ran through me like warm water. I knelt on the grass, equaling the level of our gazes, staring at the figure but unable to speak.

"You came!" she said, her grin growing to span her face like a star. "I missed you *so much*."

My mouth managed to shape a sound. "Ambra?"

Before the girl could answer, the atmosphere between us rippled, warped tangentially to the planes of space between us. The light faded—the blue and green, the red of her hair inches from my face. The wind and smells vanished. The figures disappeared.

Time stopped.

Darkness.

I tried to breathe, but nothing entered my lungs. Again, I struggled. *Breathe. Breathe, damn you!* Panic.

My muscles did not react. I did not suffocate. Nothing happened despite my frantic efforts to draw in air. Not for minutes. Not for hours. Days of struggle.

Or were they years?

Time had no meaning here.

I floated unbound by the pull of mass. No planet. No starship. I experienced—emptiness.

Where am I?

Did I have a body? I did not know. I could not see it; all was black. I had a phantom sense of limbs, yet to move them gave the sensation of paddling through molasses.

Is this hell?

Something hummed. A deep buzzing, a chainsaw in my teeth, rattling my skull, my spine. I would burst from the resonance.

Then—*brilliance*.

At a vast and terrible distance, an illuminated passage emerged, the walls iridescent. Undulating. Vibrating.

Pulling.

Yanked inside, frigid forces ripped me from the strange tar. Torn from a womb, jerked through a canal, I hurtled, blinded by endless radiance. My soul screamed. The tunnel twisted and

thrust my awareness into a merciless tube of igniting incandescence.

Cosmic powers dragged me across a forest of candles. Millions of beacons born and burning and winking and dying in shrouds of hydrogen.

They were stars.

Chapter 3

Life is short, and Art long; the crisis fleeting; experience perilous, and decision difficult. The physician must not only be prepared to do what is right himself, but also to make the patient, the attendants, and externals cooperate.

Aphorisms of Hippocrates

"Welcome back, Lieutenant Ratava."

The lights continued to burn my eyes. I squinted, blinking, trying to adapt to the brilliance. My throat burned. Swallowing sent shudders down my spine as I croaked questions.

"Where am I? What happened?"

A voice from another world responded. "Disorientation is natural after such trauma."

The glare dimmed as my eyes adjusted. A strange shape occupied my field of vision, blurred so I couldn't quite discern its nature. The soothing tones came from it.

"You suffered a severe concussion, multiple broken limbs, and third-degree burns across much of your back. Fortunately, all was well within the medical skills of your Xixian medics, both on-site and here."

Xixian.

The tall outline came into better focus. Six-fold symmetry. A jungle of extremities. Twelve dexterous fingers on each of the short, upper appendages. Eighteen visual organs perched on darting eyestalks. They sprouted from a conical protrusion atop the glimmering, multicolored torso.

Relief flowed through me in recognizing the monstrous form of our galaxy's greatest benefactors.

The Xix. Dedicated to every higher ideal humanity had ever pursued. Succeeding in living those standards to a level I found miraculous. Without them, New Earth would still be ash. The Dram would control the galaxy. The Hegemony would remain intact. Ambra Dawn would have perished centuries ago in a smuggler's death boat.

So I loved them. For me, everything returned to her.

"What do you remember, Lieutenant?"

A stabbing pain drilled into my scalp as my brows furrowed.

"I'm not sure. Kidnapped triad training session—went bad. They hit a node. Had to improvise." The images washed across my thoughts. "My suit was FUBAR. Had to do a manual escape burn to clear the plasgrens. Guess it didn't go so well."

The eyestalks bounced closer to me. "Considering you worked without autonetics, you are lucky to be alive."

I laughed. Or tried to, but the sudden movements made me gasp in pain. "*By the Daughter*. Should we just go full drone? Not sure the point of us out there. Too bloody fast."

"We need organics for the improvisation you mentioned. The AI in your mechs is certainly artificial, but *intelligent* is still under debate."

Did these creatures have a sense of humor? It was never clear. Hundreds of years, trusting and dependent on them, and they were still as alien as could be. I sure didn't understand them.

It continued. "An autonomous troop would have been annihilated in that engagement. We've seen it happen in the military's trials to remove soldiers from combat. Your creative randomness saved your team. Synthetic consciousness currently under development may change that game."

For a moment, it surprised me a medic would know such things. My foggy brain remembered the Xix had some sort of communal memory. Rumors said it was like the experience the Readers shared through the Daughter. It gave them access to everything that happened to their species.

"How many did we lose?"

The alien physician flitted around the instrumentation in a bizarre bouncing choreography. "Three in the end," it said.

Half my group. "Dear God."

"Two more are seriously wounded and under care here. You were all flown to Delhi after triage, and from there to Tokyo, to the Xixian village outside the city."

Uchujin.

A center created after the rise of New Earth, after the Unmade Calamity. Following the first few years of war, the Xix had settled in several locations across the globe. They helped humanity remove the Dram and their agents. Shadow cities rose near our metropolises. San Francisco, Paris, Auckland, Shanghai. *Tokyo*. They built their own separate habitats. Constructs optimized for thriving on another world.

Always with the permission and collaboration of local governments. *Not* always with the approval of the populace. I'd never forget my first engagement with the Terra First extremists. Hatred for humans with different skin or speech was intense enough. Imagine the hostility toward the truly alien.

Over the last two hundred years, Uchujin had grown to a size rivaling Tokyo. It served as the de facto center of Xixian governance of their population on Earth. Technological contributions in engineering and medicine flowed from the glowing capital. They had taken me to the best facilities on the planet.

Which worried me.

"Why am I here?"

The Xix stopped bouncing and attending the medical equipment. Its eyestalks centered on me. "Lieutenant Ratava, do you remember nothing else?"

"Nothing from the engagement. I'm sorry."

The odd eyes didn't move. It was a little unnerving. "What about after, before you woke?"

The dream. How could it know? Had it been monitoring my brain functions? Why would some injury-induced REM chaos be of any interest to this thing?

"Just...dreams."

"Of what nature?"

"Weird things, being trapped, paralyzed, flying through space. Typical nonsense nightmare stuff. Why?"

"Your mental activity after your concussion was highly unusual."

"Wouldn't it be?"

The Xix turned a host of eyestalks back to monitors and equipment, keeping several on me. "In predictable ways, yes. Your cortical scans, however, were not like anything we have ever seen."

"I'm not a Reader, if you're wondering. Tested three times. Believe me, my parents were desperate I'd turn out to be one. Like my cousins. Since the Calamity, it's the only thing besting *doctor* in Indian families."

My smiled faded, the humor lost again on the alien.

"We need to understand as much as we can about you, Lieu-

tenant. Your heroics have made quite an impression. I have been informed that you are in consideration for a special transfer."

My chest constricted. *Could it be?* After two years of failed applications? After devoting myself to the MECHcore, training with a passion matched only by that of my dearest hope—*had I succeeded?*

"Do you mean...?"

"Appointment to the Temple Guardians." The Xix knew what was in my heart. "You will receive a visit from your superiors as soon as I clear you medically. When we are satisfied that your vitals are acceptable."

"And are they?" Now I really *was* worried about those stupid scans. I cursed the dreams and my overactive subconscious.

Eyestalks jumped back toward me. A small set remained glued to the output of a floating 3D projection of my brain painted in multiple hues.

"Probationary, Lieutenant. You will continue to have monitoring. The Temple Guards protect our most precious resource, as you know. They are screened as no one else. In two hundred years, we have never had an incident. Never an unstable personality. Never a traitor or criminal. Solely those with the highest devotion to the Daughter. This is an age of increasing threat from outside and within. I hope that you can understand our vigilance."

I did. Had I been the one screening, I might have rejected my own appointment. My rashness, impulsiveness, my obsession had to raise red flags.

But I wasn't anyone else. I knew, in all the galaxy, they would never find another so devoted to her.

"Continued monitoring," it repeated. "Cleared for service."

Cleared for service!

The room swam and shimmered. An elation pressed to explode from me. I wanted to shout, sing, dance! To serve her, so close, each day.

I had to compose myself. Especially being *on probation*. I had to appear for all the world to be the stable, capable, and trustworthy soldier they were demanding.

"Should the Core deem me worthy, I would be honored."

The alien medic stared at me in silence.

Chapter 4

Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.

Jesus of Nazareth

"Kavita, please. He is not a child."

Father scolded Mother as she tapped the holographer in their Delhi apartment. Her crimson sari enriched the brandy of her troubled eyes. They darted about. Her long, elegant fingers gesticulated in the center of my Japanese quarters.

The Tokyo MECHcore base was small but well outfitted. The reception from India was crystal clear. I could see the garnets on her bangles.

The combination of genes from my parents struck me again. My mother, petite from the northern subcontinent, lighter of complexion with a beautiful smile. My father, from the southern continent, dark as an African, tall, thin, with a bristling mustache. They painted me in hue somewhere between the two. I received my father's height and build, my mother's face and smile. My

psychology anomalous, one that had kept the entire family in turmoil since I was small.

"He is *my* child, Sriram, and I will tell him when he is acting a fool!"

The anguish on her face was all too clear in the projection before me. My father stared upward. He knew all he could do was to wait this out.

"Are you deliberately trying to kill your own mother?"

"Amma, please..."

"First you join this army, full of these aliens and men of low character. Just listen to you speak! Your language is foul like some American soldier. Then you are nearly killed because of it and in a hospital thousands of miles away. We cannot come to see you."

Wonderful. She was crying.

"Now? You inform me you will go to the *Temple*, a place where powers from outer space will gather. Where they war with monsters. To risk your own life! Why, Nitin? Why? Due to some naive notion of romance for a woman who is no longer human!"

"Amma, stop!"

My cheeks flushed. I had to control my emotions. She would attack her. It always came to that. Since I was a child, growing in vehemence when I was an adolescent, and now, desperate as I made my choices as a man.

Grown, yet still unable to free myself from childish fears. My love of Ambra Dawn wasn't immature, but my mother's ability to tie me in knots was shameful.

"Do you know what I have done?" Her face was firm with that expression when she punished me for coming home with my uniform soiled. "I have torn down the projections in your room! Yes? Do you hear? On the walls, the ceilings. I have thrown out the crystals, all the videos and images. There is now just a bed and desk. A proper room for a proper child, not a mad shrine to a freak!"

"Kavita, enough!" My father hissed, shaking his head.

I was grateful for his intervention, however small it would be. It wasn't that he empathized with my feelings, but he at least understood that he didn't comprehend. In his universe, space existed for his son to diverge, to be someone he could love and worry for and yet not control. Not so with my mother.

I tried a different approach. "This is a high honor."

She shrieked. "It is a shame! Your cousins are doctors or Readers! You? A *soldier*. Chasing a mad goddess!"

"I am determined, Amma!"

My clarity of mind shocked me. The usual simmering turmoil from my mother's harsh disapproval cooled. Her ugly words about me and the Daughter fell flat. A peace intervened through all the hurt. I calmed, sure of myself, of my life, of the path I was taking. I had always known where I had to be. For the first time, an assurance gave me confidence before my parents.

"I will go to the Sahara. I'll stand guard at the Temple. A handful of people from across the world are allowed there. The gods have chosen me. I've felt their call all my life. I know where I must be. And it's with her."

She sobbed, my father holding her shoulders, but she glanced toward me. She had heard the tone in my voice, and a resignation settled in her eyes. The sudden surety inside me gave way to insight, and I saw a path to salve her suffering.

You see, while my father was a lapsed Catholic, my mother was a devout Hindu. She went to temple, was faithful with Nitya at home. She was particularly devoted to Kali, the goddess whose name echoes time. My mother had a personal prayer shrine, rarely visited by my skeptic father, built as an addition to the house. A floor-to-ceiling icon of the divinity dominates that space. The Redeemer of the Universe.

"Amma," I whispered, staring into her projected eyes floating in front of me, her face as long as my body, "do you not see?

Ambra Dawn is an *avatar*. She is the Bhavatārini here and now. They call her the Daughter of *Time*—can it be anything else? She delivered the world. Go and ask her image. What better place can there be for your son?"

Her eyes widened, and I couldn't tell whether it was from fear I was mad or terror I might be right. Perhaps both. She buried her face in my father's chest.

"Nitin," he said, his voice rough, "we will talk later. I...I am happy you are well. We are thinking of you." He switched off the connection.

I let out a long breath. It was never easy with parents.

Afterwards, an alert tone rang from the house AI. "A visitor has arrived at your primary entrance. Please advise."

The colonel. 6:25 p.m. He was early, as was his habit.

"Visual—external view, front door."

The holographer flashed. The giant form of Lieutenant Colonel Chad Snowden invaded my living room. At fifty-seven, he resembled a boxer more than a paper pusher. He'd earned a distinct reputation to match the appearance. One of three humans known to defeat a Dram warrior in hand-to-hand combat. For that badge of honor, he had lost an eye and gained a five-inch scar across his face. Most pertinent to any interactions with the man, he was Texan.

"Son, you gonna ogle my crusted ass all day or let me the hell in?"

At least he was in a good mood.

This is it. Nothing short of a court-martial or promotion warranted a visit from our regiment's leader. After the words of the talkative Xixian medic, I was counting on the latter.

"Allow entry."

I rushed to the door, my limp almost gone. The bolt locks retracted with a loud click, and the magnetic latch reversed polarity. The heavy slab swung inward and Snowden marched in.

I stood at attention with a salute. These Americans were hard to predict. One day, a superior officer would have a beer with you and the next dress you down for a sloppy stance. Best to go formal and play it safe.

"Colonel Snowden, sir."

He stormed past me. "At ease, son. You got any bourbon?"

So it was going to be informal. I shook my head. "I've got saké."

"With ice. None of that warm shit."

I tried not to make a face. *Texans*.

He paced around the room, cocking his head for his one eye, and let out a low whistle. I understood. The Japanese did things well. The room was spacious, three times the size of standard quarters, with couches and tables sized to fit Westerners' expectations. A top-flight holographer. I had my own modernized kitchen, complete with nutrient synth.

"Didn't have such fancy digs back in my day. Least not in the desert."

I gripped the bottle. "You were there?" I finished pouring the drink and handed it to him. The ice cubes rang like bells as he gestured.

His drawl thickened. "Sit down, Ratava. We gotta talk."

The colonel pulled up a seat at the table, and I sat across from him. He took a sip of the sake and scratched his temples, reclining in his chair.

"You know why I'm here."

"My request for transfer."

"Son, I've had three, *three* soldiers over thirty years under my command sent to the desert. Always unpredictable. They weren't usually the toughest, the smartest, or the best. Don't get me

wrong, they were always *solid*, but the Witch has her ways of seeing things."

I suppressed a grimace. Countless names existed for the Daughter, many unkind. I'd heard this one used by a lot of skeptics and extremist prisoners. Along with hard-asses who had seen too much to believe in fairies. Snowden wasn't a rebel—of this I was sure. He was as tough as gnarled oak and spoke like a skeptic. It didn't matter. I'd dealt with it in the MECHcore, but this conversation might be unpleasant.

His shrewd eye glared at me, sizing me up. "Ratava, I understand you have a certain fondness for the Witch."

"I prefer to call her the Daughter, but—yes. I don't suppose there's anyone in the Core who doesn't know. The military can't block all the anom networking."

"Pinups on your walls ain't gonna prep you for what's waiting in the desert. At the *Temple*. All your pretty schoolbooks, the propaganda in the media. That's all a fairy tale. Designed to keep fifteen billion souls in line."

"You sound like the extremists."

Snowden laughed. "What makes any rebel cause a contender is a foundation of *truth*. That I can see it doesn't make me a traitor or give me desire to be one. It makes me a better leader. If you're going to survive down there, you've got to grow up, son."

I felt my jaw clenching, my molars grinding against each other. "Yes, sir. What do I need to know?"

He waved his hand through the air. "Way more than I've got time to tell you. Like I said, they snatch my people rarely and without warning. Your fondness for the...*Daughter*," he said, pausing with a smile, "didn't have you high on the list. Hell, kid, I wasn't convinced. Pretty unbalanced application and history. But reason don't know shit when it comes to her."

"I don't understand."

He sighed and leaned forward, resting his massive arms on his

knees. "There's too much to learn now. It's all in flux, anyway." He shook his head, wrinkles cracking his face as he gazed past me. "Times are changing. The war's goin' bad."

"We've had setbacks. The Dram are resilient."

"Setbacks? You've got to read *between* the lines of the official reports. We're *losing* this war, Ratava." He held my eye. "The bugs have breached the galactic center."

My stomach dropped. That was our defensive nexus. If the galaxy were a wheel, the hub gave the most direct access to any location through the Orb Time Tree. To take back that axis—it was inconceivable. It was a disaster.

"There's hasn't been word of—"

"Of course not. Do you know the panic that would result?"

"The Daughter. She controls the Time Spheres. How can they use the Strings if she prevents it?"

"Well, that *is* where things get interesting. If they could jump willy-nilly, they'd be turning us on a spit for those damn spider pets they keep. They haven't shown up on our doorstep, and I assume the Witch is the reason. But the center *isn't* holding. More and more they're gaining access, making raids. It's all hushed up, but the writing's on the wall. Ambra Dawn, even if she won't die, ain't God. Her powers are failing."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Then there's something you don't understand about all this. Her power doesn't fail. She reached back through time and saved us all!"

"So the story goes. Even if you set stock in that myth, she didn't do it alone. She's not all-powerful. She needed *Them*, these aliens. Saintly ETs we're to accept, and so they appear." He laughed, glancing across my body. "They sure as hell fixed you up fast—three weeks after that crash? Yeah, that's alien meds for you."

"They treated me well."

"I'm bet they did. They always do. But do we really know them? Has anyone ever penetrated their culture, understood their

motivations? Their *real* plans? Two hundred years on Earth now, building cities, giving us tech, plotting who knows what, and we're none the wiser."

"They helped free us from the tyranny of the Dram."

"Words right out of a textbook. A-plus, son." He downed the rest of his drink. "There's enough military history of the Emancipation to convince me it happened. But did we trade one alien rule for another?"

Now he was edging close to treason. "Sir, we can't understand them. They're too advanced for us."

Again, he waved his hand. "Maybe, or perhaps it's just more smoke and mirrors to keep us from questioning."

I was dizzy, lost at sea in this frightening conversation. This was my commanding officer! "Colonel, what are you trying to tell me?"

Snowden rose and approached the massive window overlooking Tokyo. The sun crept in back of the forest of skyscrapers. Their lights gave the appearance of an endless checkered board. Spacecraft darted back and forth across the darkening skies. Off to the left, an eerie green glowed from Uchujin.

He shook the ice cubes in his glass with one hand, his other arm behind his back. "We're at a turning point, Ratava. Like they used to say, 'The game is afoot.' Call it soldier's intuition. After surviving a hell of a lot of death holes, you might want to take mine seriously. Something's gonna happen. Not today. Not tomorrow. But it's close. There's something big growing out there in between those stars. When it comes, there'll be a fire raining down on that Temple in the desert."

Ambra. "Then, with all due respect, sir, I must be there. Now."

Snowden turned around and stared at me. "Have you heard a goddamn thing I've said?"

I stood and set my shoulders. "I've listened to all of it. If I've

been chosen, then what I most need to do right now is get on a transport for the Sahara. ASAP."

His single eye bored into me. "I don't know whether you're the biggest damn fool I've ever met or a fucking apostle."

I swallowed as he continued to stare at me. "Neither, sir, I hope. I just know where I have to be."

He shook his head again and put his glass down on the table. "They weren't shitting me when they said you were a believer." He walked toward the door and pressed the touchpad to exit. It swung out, and he turned back to me. "Report tomorrow at the hoverport, oh-six hundred. Pack lightly. You'll get special gear on arrival. And a new team, *Captain*."

"Captain?"

"And, Ratava, keep your eyes open. Innocent doves end up sacrificed in the sands. The animal for the desert—it's a snake."

He stepped through the portal, and it whisked shut, the bolts slamming into place.

Chapter 5

No matter how fast light travels, it finds the darkness has always got there first, and is waiting for it.

Terry Pratchett, *Reaper Man*

I didn't sleep much that night.

What little I got was plagued by parades of dreams. Groggy narratives slipped through my mind—training, childhood, Xixian medics hovering over me. In the end, I remembered almost nothing.

Except for the last one. A flashback to primary school in Delhi. I stood in front of a projection of the Daughter as some angry teacher repeated my name.

"Ratava. Nitin Ratava! Answer the question!"

Reliving the first time I had seen a holo of Ambra Dawn. A life-size image in three dimensions, the shimmer of a poor-quality hololamp ghosting her form. I leaned forward to touch the red curls cascading down her shoulders. Her eyes glowed like giant pools of fluorescent water.

I was to respond to some inquiry about her. The lecturer picked on different children to recite the lessons. I stood frozen, transfixed—struck dumb by her beauty and majesty. A boy of six overwhelmed and unmade in an instant.

In this dream, the memory changed. The static holograph animated and turned to me. Her bright eyes locked with mine, and I bathed in a warm radiance. All else dimmed—the school, the instructor, the world. She remained.

I drank those green pools, felt them draw me in like some wormhole in space toward another universe. A slow acceleration twisted my vision. I rotated faster around those beautiful, unblinking eyes.

She opened her lips and whispered, "*Nitin*."

I woke shaking to the blaring of my alarm.

I threw on my travel uniform. My lieutenant insignia glinted under the lights. I'd have to see if the colonel's last words would include gaining another bar to the rank of captain. The promotion wasn't so important to me. The destination was all that mattered.

I packed few items, as instructed. My standard issue firearm, a Xixian gyrostabilized slug thrower. All-carbon composite, grid synchronized workhorse of the MECHcore. Since we served most of our time suited up, they didn't get a lot of use. But old traditions died hard. Otherwise, one uniform change, grooming gear, and a single zettabyte crystal. Small, not much for holoviewing. It carried graphs of my parents, cousins, friends. All the rest of her.

I rushed out the door.

The hangar buzzed with activity. As I walked inside, my stomach gurgled after a miscalibrated drone transport slung me from the barracks. The queasiness couldn't suppress the awe. The mass of the hovercraft filled the space like a mountain, the classic image of a flying saucer to our pre-contact ancestors. Disk-shaped, protruding dome on top, it could handle a thousand soldiers at capacity. Not to mention cargo. Ring-bands of magneto-thrusters lined the bottom. They were potent enough to accelerate the ship into orbit.

Troops were already marching onboard. Most were infantry for deployment at one of the Six Cities in the middle of the Sahara. These surrounded the Temple, housing human and alien engineers operating a massive network of esoteric equipment. Their purpose was to enhance the Daughter's communion with the Orbs.

The habitats perched over ancient aquifers below the sands. In that wasteland, water was life. Older geological periods filled the subterranean lakes when the desert was a jungle. So went the textbooks, anyway. For us grunts, mystery masked the dunes. Few had visited. Those who had never spoke of it.

A handful of travelers would continue from the outer circle toward the Temple. Shrouded in secrecy, rumors recounted a gigantic structure embedded in the badlands. *The Dish*. A massive antenna that focused Ambra Dawn's psychic spacetime powers. Accounts described it as buried under the sands in the bedrock. No holos, minimal reports, and more contradictions than established fact. Whatever was there, the occupants maintained the strictest silence.

A lucky group who would be granted access to the inner palace of the Daughter was waiting for me near the hovercraft. Colonel Snowden stood with his hands on his hips. The black scowl on his face would likely turn a sandworm. Reflective shades

concealed his eyes. I half expected cowboy boots to complete the picture. Standard issue soles ended my fantasizing.

"Captain Ratava. About goddamned time."

He shoved a small, latched box toward me. I took it, popped it open, and saw the gleaming captain's bars.

He smirked. "No time for formalities. Paperwork cleared at light speed. Not that it'll mean a rat's ass down there. They have a whole *other* way of doin' things."

He turned to three other soldiers, two men and a woman, and swept his arm outward, as if to the Saharan sands.

"Which all of you will be learning of soon enough. This is Captain Nitin Ratava. You've been briefed, but until you land and are put under Temple command, you'll be taking orders from him. Introduce yourselves."

The colonel moved back, his body language demanding I engage for the introductions. I stepped forward, coming to a stop a few feet from the trio. The male leftmost from my perspective brought his hand to his forehead.

"Master Sergeant David Kim, sir! Operations!" Korean from the name and accent. Medium height, stocky with thick quads stretching his fatigues. Eager beaver.

I saluted back and turned to the middle soldier. She was tall, her gaze sharp, skin a shade darker than my own. Her salute was swift and hard.

"Warrant Officer Aisha Williams, sir."

She'd be my second in command. I'd need to get to know her well.

I pivoted to meet the third, a Caucasian male around my size and of moderate build. I caught a glint from contact lenses.

"Sergeant First Class Ryan Marshall, sir," he said, the most reserved of the group. "Medical."

I turned to the colonel. "What about the rest of the team?"

"Coming from other corners of the globe, Captain. They'll

rendezvous outside the Six Cities for your briefing. Afterward you journey to the Temple."

"Yes, sir." I had a lot to learn.

The Texan jerked his head toward the hovercraft. "Why don't you kids saddle up before this wagon leaves. Ratava, a word."

They grabbed their duffels and darted off, jogging onto the transport. The pad was empty but for the service staff prepping the saucer.

I turned to Snowden. "Colonel, I don't understand. You aren't coming with us? I thought—"

"Command and Control gets a reboot a hundred miles outside the Six Cities. As I said, they've got their own way of doing things. You'll get your commanding officer there. Besides, there's no way in hell I'm setting foot in the desert again. They know that."

I nodded without understanding, feeling increasingly isolated. Different commanders, brand-new team, unknown rules. I had *a lot* to learn.

"Last bit of intel for you, Captain." He waited as several dock workers rushed past, lugging crates and loading them into the hull.

Announcements blared over the speakers.

"*All nonessential personnel clear the hovercraft pad. Liftoff in five minutes.*"

He didn't raise his voice, and I had to concentrate to understand his words over the noise.

"I'm under the strictest orders not to be telling you any of it, but you need to know. This has *not* been a normal recruitment—hell, if any of them are normal."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"*A58L departure imminent.*"

"You had an unusual visitor during your coma, son."

"Visitor?"

"*Liftoff in four minutes.*"

"Never happened before. Damnedest thing. Shuttle landed two days after you came in. They summoned me, requested I meet an envoy from the desert at the hospital. *Your* room."

"My room? From the desert?"

His jaw trembled, and his voice fell to a whisper. A brief lull silenced the announcements, and I could catch his shaking words.

"Spent hours with you, didn't say a goddamn word. Just sat there by your bed, staring with those terrible eyes." He barked a staccato laugh. "That's why I left. Put in for a transfer my third year. I couldn't take those damn eyes anymore. How do you stand in front of blind eyes that see *into* you?"

"Sir, *who* was there?" My hands shook.

"Isn't it obvious, son?"

"*Shuttle A58L, departing in two minutes. Clear the hovercraft pad.*"

I couldn't say anything. My brain had stalled.

"Now, you think on that as you break atmo."

Chapter 6

We must rise above the Earth—to the top of the clouds and beyond —for only thus will we fully understand the world in which we live.

Socrates

Liftoff was what I had come to expect from the magthrusters. A smooth acceleration lulls you into gawking at the alien tech. Whiplash nausea hits around the time the ship reaches escape velocity.

They isolated us from the rest of the passengers on the transport. Tucked in the middle of the saucer, we luxuriated in a private lounge outfitted for the brass or moneyed. The five-point restraints were plush. You could almost enjoy it until you needed to revisit your breakfast.

Each person experiences a unique reaction to the ride. Some find the initial acceleration disorienting. It's *too smooth.* Unlike any human tech to get from A to B. For others, it's the switch when breaking atmo. Several minutes of zero-g before the dive back to

the destination. Many are disturbed by the subsequent plunge. Whatever your poison, lots of barf bags come out.

For me, it was the onset of weightlessness. I had the palpable sense my stomach was separating from the rest of my body. My brain took issue with the sensation. I knew how to control it. I knew to eat little in the morning. I needed to concentrate. Of course, it was exactly at this point in the journey my warrant officer decided to get chatty.

"Not feeling so great, Captain?" asked Williams, a half-hidden smirk dancing at the corners of her mouth.

I changed the topic by going on the offensive. "How much combat experience do you have?"

The grin was gone. "Standard basic and advanced infantry M, sir. Plus four live skirmishes on Freinzel."

"I hear that moon was pretty damn infested." I could see the glow of pride on her face.

"Two thousand Dram grunts with some allied species. Three triads protecting a central hive."

"How'd you take them on?"

She paused, a shocked expression on her face. "Air support, Captain. Drones. We cleaned up the soldiers afterward. SOP."

"I see." I let the silence do its job.

Williams squinted at me. The wheels were turning. "I've heard rumors some teams are taking on worms directly."

Kim and Marshall woke at her words and glanced over. I had their full attention.

"It's new. The Xix have developed a randomized movement pattern for the mechs. It's a little scary—you hand over complete control to the AI—and your suit flies around in ways you can't predict. Confuses the hell out of the bugs—operators too. You do it right, they're sitting ducks, and you vaporize them."

Williams studied my face. "You've done this."

"I have. It's why I'm here. You're all going to learn, and I'm going to train the core troops at the Temple. Or so the plan goes."

Kim shook his head. "I don't know, man. Computer run? Why do they need us, then?"

I corrected my assessment—Korean American. With English the default in New Earth forces, training ensured a functional fluency. The Chinese resisted a little, but with India, Europe, and America onboard, it was a settled matter. That standard skill set could mask origins. At least until you'd engaged in some real conversation. He wasn't a native English speaker. Likely an immigrant to the United States. I hoped I'd get all their dossiers in the desert. This entire redeployment was being rushed like hell.

"Because the AIs are as dumb as they are smart. Brittle. When the patterns fail, they still need us to think on our feet. Improvise."

"Improvise? Sounds like a perfect way to get yourself killed," said Kim.

"It's dangerous," I agreed.

"We've heard the rumors." It was the medic, Marshall.

"What rumors?" I asked.

He continued. "Tokyo General. They brought in wounded from India. Kept them there a few hours before they transferred them to Uchujin. That was you, wasn't it?"

I shrugged.

Williams cut in. "Word was the team got into trouble. Training exercises with *live* triads."

"On *Earth*?" Kim laughed. "How'd you sign the bugs up for that?"

"The Daughter," I said. "That's what we hear, anyway. She grabs them, somehow, from somewhere. Maybe from Dram."

Kim's jaw hung open. "She what?"

I shook my head. "Wormhole snatch? Xixian raid? No idea. They're the real thing, though. Right in the deserts of India."

"Fucking *crazy*," said Kim again. "*Jesus*. What the hell are we getting ourselves into down there?"

He gestured toward Africa. The continent expanded on the blue marble as we descended from Earth orbit. The Sahara was unmistakable from this altitude. A tan brush stroke across the northern face.

I asserted my truth.

"We're getting ourselves into critical missions in this war. We're learning the advanced techniques. Training against the enemy themselves to prepare. Because our job will be to protect what's most important."

"The Daughter," said Williams, her smile returning as she stared at me.

"Yes, of course."

The two men broke eye contact with me.

She continued. "You speak of her with awe."

It was uncomfortable, but I knew all this would come out, if they didn't already know from the grapevine.

"Go on, let's get this over with," I said, noticing the other two reengage.

"You have quite the reputation as a member of the faithful, Captain," said Marshall. "What denomination are you—not Orthodox—you don't sport the gear. Chrono Reformed?"

I scowled. "Special Forces are worse than the tabloids."

"Knowledge is how we stay alive, sir," said Williams.

She was right. They deserved some words. I sighed. Now came the part that wouldn't make sense to them. "None. No creed. It's a...personal relationship. Since I was a kid."

"Sounds Next Agey," said Kim.

"Every team I've been on worries about this until they get used to it. I can tell you it's not different from any other beliefs each of us has. You have nothing to worry about. I do my job. Better than most."

"Except our job's all about her now, isn't it?" noted Williams. "This isn't like any other assignment. You've got stakes."

I locked eyes with her. "We've *all* got stakes. Our planet has stakes. She's what freed us and keeps us free still. Everyone on this world, in this transport. Each of you owes your life and freedom to the Daughter. Guarding her is protecting Earth. Whatever I or anyone else feels doesn't figure in. Those are the hard facts. That's why we wear the uniform."

The muffled sounds of rushing atmosphere spilled through the internal silence. I glanced at the floating view screen. Northern Africa shone in the darkness of the room.

Kim laughed. "Hell, Captain, what people do on their own time is their business. Local tail, boy-girl-alien threesome, bingo—not my concern. All I need to know is when to start shooting."

He aimed his hand like a blaster, angling imaginary ion slingers, his face that of a hunter. Marshall chuckled, and I smiled. One thing about the MECHcore, we lived for combat. It was an addiction, primitive drives augmented by the rapid feedback of the machine enhancement. The thrill of life-and-death performance at light speed was a hell of a high.

Williams's eyes sparkled, but she didn't smile.

Chapter 7

Thoroughly conscious ignorance is the prelude to every real advance in science.

James Clerk Maxwell

The Thar is hot, but my training there did not prepare me for our planet's largest desert. When the transport doors opened, the environment assailed us. First, a blast of sandy wind burning like a blowtorch. Next, a tan radiance bright enough to hurt through our smartglasses. Finally, a striking ensemble of human and Xixian handlers to shepherd us for the trip.

The transfer of power was immediate and obvious. Our infantry and officers stood surrounded by citizens of the Six Cities. They didn't wear Force uniforms and answered to the Daughter. None held themselves like commanders. Matching rumors, they behaved more like a religious caste.

The humans dressed according to their personal traditions and the necessities of Saharan life. Over time, their clothes resembled

the garb of the nomads of the nearby regions. The Berber Arabs and other tribes had long ago optimized life under the sun and over the stinging sands. Full-body coverings were the norm. Modernized fabrics expelled heat by day but trapped it during the cold nights. It wasn't unusual to get a swing from blistering to freezing across a single evening. Clothing needed particular properties if you weren't indoors with climate control.

The Xix required no garments, even if they sported decorative dress at times. Their homeworld was one massive Sahara. They relished New Earth settings with two of their six-toed feet in the sand. Their metabolism handled both extremes in temperature effortlessly. The extraterrestrial skin was impervious to everything except the most violent sandstorms.

Towering over the welcoming party was an alien wearing a translucent, cyan robe. The covering opened near conical tissue erupting upward from its midsection. A blue-green metal band locked the fabric in place. I recognized the collar as their universal translator. Underneath the gown, the creature's body flared in color. Deep-purple spots, large and small, sprayed across the form in dizzying patterns. Many of the eyestalks sprouting from the cone aimed at me. Its gaze scorched as hot as the buffeting air.

Standing alongside the Xix were several humans in the white robes of the Temple servants. Before them were two uniformed soldiers, a man and a woman. By the MECHcore insignia, I knew they must be the remainder of my team.

Williams, Kim, and Marshall fell into a line behind me as we approached the group. We sported advanced desert gear, pre-sized and provided in the saucer. Brown-and-tan camouflage clothing, hats, combat boots, and dark smartglasses. I dialed the brightness down on the shades to better make out the faces. I stopped in front of the additional Core members and saluted.

"Captain Nitin Ratava of New Earth Force reporting for duty. This is part of ODA 111, my assigned M-troop service at the

Temple. Sergeants Marshall and Kim," I said, gesturing. "Warrant Officer Williams. Requesting permission to enter the Six Cities."

A long and awkward pause. The desert wind whistled, the robes of our greeting party dancing to some turbulent rhythm. It was unnerving stepping into this unique bubble of governance. Who actually held authority here? Not my team, that was for sure. One of the humans? I scanned their faces but met blank stares.

The eyes of the Xix drew my attention. Instinct told me the seat of influence lay with the alien.

I took off my glasses and, blinded by the light and grit, squinted toward the monster. "Is permission granted?"

The creature spoke through the translator clasped about its cone like a necklace. "Indeed, Captain," came the fluid accent of the device. The voice was genderless but warm, the tones sharp with intelligence. "Both you and your team. Two you have not met and stand before you. Weapons Sergeant Grant Moore and Sergeant Erica Fox, your engineer."

It was odd to hear the alien speak the military jargon. I had to remind myself to respect these monsters. Underestimating them was foolishness. They could handle all our areas of expertise without breaking a sweat. Well, almost all of them. Humans could still *Read* better than any. That was why they were living on New Earth. Why the MECHcore were here.

I made the introductions within the group. The last two members appeared as capable as the rest. Fox was a small woman of mixed heritage. I guessed Chinese and European. A slight detachment in her demeanor reflected what I'd come to expect from the techs.

Moore was a Force officer from a recruitment poster. He towered with muscles and tattoos. I'd discover he also had a tongue loose and salty. His lowbrow British twang gave his speech a memorable character. Both grouped with the others of the team, and we were now facing the alien and its greeting party.

"Captain Ratava, I am called Waythrel, and I serve Ambra Dawn at the Temple."

My throat dried. *Waythrel?* A figure out of the history books. The Xixian spy on Dram who had helped free Ambra Dawn from their dungeons. Who had accompanied her on her mission to save Earth. For more than two hundred years, the creature had been her closest and most trusted advisor. By the Daughter, what was it doing here?

"Waythrel of Xix, we're honored that you have chosen to welcome us." I used formal tones, employing half-forgotten exocultural protocols from our basic Force training.

The eyestalks flitted about. "It is we who are honored. We have an extraordinary assignment for you, and Ambra desires that we get to it with all speed. We will rest tonight and depart first thing in the morning. My assistants here will lead you to prepared housing."

I could sense the members of my team stealing glances in my direction. They were likely dying to know what was behind this. An unprecedented visit of one of the Temple's most legendary residents. An *extraordinary* assignment.

MECHcore teams usually played an important if unexciting role at the Temple, handling security and personal safety of the populace. Nothing like Special Forces buzzing around in mechs to make an impression. I couldn't focus on this broader picture. My pulse had spiked. Waythrel's words were spinning in my mind.

Ambra desires.

The Daughter herself planned something usual for my team. We weren't going to perform a typical MECHcore duty. Our purpose was unusual, something significant *she* was planning. We might soon be in her presence.

I struggled to suppress my excitement.

The alien bowed. "Welcome to the Fourth City, Captain."

Chapter 8

There is one disease which is widespread, and from which men rarely escape: that each thinks his mind more clever and more learned than it is. I have found that this affliction has attacked many an intelligent person.

Maimonides

Williams stood in front of the group with her hands on her hips. "Captain, what the hell's going on?"

We gathered in our assigned quarters. Despite their age, the buildings appeared ultra-modern, a Xixian design common in the Six Cities. The internal architecture was *dynamic*, composed of fields altered for appearance, texture, and position. Need a bigger room to house your troops? No problem! Reprogram the damn walls. You selected anything from wood to marble to alien matter preferred by the designers. Realistic and practical.

The external construction was more permanent. A concrete composite performing a similar service to the high-tech clothing. Heat stayed out in the day but remained at night. It was also hard

as hell too. I didn't see a single scratch on the gleaming surfaces despite hundreds of years of sandstorms. The Xix knew how to build.

"Calm down, Williams."

Her eyes flashed. That was the problem with elite forces, especially those the Temple had selected. They were bright, asked questions. Filled with attitude. It gave them the edge the ordinary soldier lacked. Produced creative destroyers who handled the tough missions.

And made them giant pains in the ass to command. The meeting hadn't begun before the inquisition erupted.

"Captain, I'm chill, but I signed up for Guardian duty. I know what that requires. I'm prepared. I didn't sign up for any *extraordinary assignment*. I want to know what we're getting into."

"Take a seat, Williams," I insisted, motioning to a row of chairs in the center of the room. A smartholo floated above us, but I didn't know if I'd get to use it. I'd planned to go over the new MECH AI they'd employ to engage the Dram. For now, it was on hold.

She eyed me a moment and let out a curt breath, grabbing a chair alongside the others. If one could passive-aggressively sit, she had it down.

The five were in a single line in front of me, Williams on the far left, Kim next to her, followed by Fox and Marshall. On his own, a few feet from the rest, was the hulking Moore, keeping to himself.

"I know as much as you do about this, which is *nothing*. Colonel Snowden warned us that, once we landed, we'd be under new management. Previous orders and protocols don't apply here. You signed on knowing this. That means we adapt or get back on the transport and bug out."

"Bugger out, mate!" the Brit laughed. "Squids ordering us to fight bugs for that queen runnin' the damn world."

"You're welcome to fly back tomorrow," I said.

He smiled.

Marshall interjected, "Then how do we prepare for a mystery assignment?"

I ran my fingers through my hair. "By staying flexible, informed, in shape, and ready. Our enemies don't play by any rules, so there isn't any certainty in any engagement." I gestured to the holoscreen. "Not even in the new attack plans I was going to introduce tonight. That's true for standard duties or for whatever they have planned for us."

"You can't know that, sir," said Kim.

"I don't see why we're so worried," interrupted Fox. "There's never been as much as a shot fired at the Temple. Or even in the Cities. Not in two hundred years. We go in, march where they say, do our time, and we're out with benefits. Meanwhile, think of where we *are*."

I could have let it go. Our past predicted she was right, but Snowden's words wormed through my thoughts. My team deserved the bigger picture.

"A tour there was simple before, but things are changing. I suppose you've heard some of the rumors."

Glances hopped between soldiers in the short silence.

Williams spoke first. "Losses on the five fronts. Raids. Supply lines cut."

"Worse," I said. *They needed to know.*

Moore scowled. "So, what are the bloody bastards not telling us now?"

"The Dram have compromised the galactic hub."

Several sat upright.

Williams hissed. "Those mother—"

"Yes," I said. "Some very bad news from the colonel."

Kim waved his arms. "Whoa—time the fuck out! The center? What does that mean? Hit and runs? Occupation? Are we going to get bug warboats pouring out of the Orb toward New Earth?"

"I don't know. I don't have field reports, and Snowden said it's all hushed up to prevent a panic." I tried to slow this down. "It can't be they've taken control, or we *would* have bugs crawling out of the sewers here. But it's got to be bad. Significant penetration with intermittent access to the central transit points."

Williams whistled. "Well, that ain't good."

"That's why I'm telling you this. We're not part of Force here. We're cut off from the leadership and any communications by the Xixian defense fields. We're on our own. There hasn't been an attack here since they built the Temple, but we can't assume anymore. I think Snowden was trying to tell me that. Don't take anything for granted."

Kim stammered. "Do they know something he didn't? What if there *is* an invasion on the way? Maybe *that's* our important assignment! A fucking meat grinder."

He's panicking.

"Calm down, Sergeant," I said. "Don't you think there would be a Force mobilization the likes of which we haven't seen? Like the early days of the war?" I allowed that to sink in. "We might have had some setbacks. Losses the brass don't want advertised on every wave across the allied net, but it's not that bad yet. We need to trust the Daughter. Ambra Dawn has never let us down. Let's keep our heads on straight and not lose touch with her."

Kim wasn't onboard. "You're the one a little too touched with her."

Fox glared at him. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Means everyone knows the captain's a true believer."

She reached inside her shirt and yanked out a pendant. It was New Earth with a sunrise breaking over the edge of the planet. One of the main religious symbols of the Dawnists.

"He's not the only one, asshole."

Kim frowned back. "Well, maybe you two are ready to die for her, see whatever heaven they promised you. Maybe he sees what's coming and welcomes it. I don't."

I moved to respond, but Moore cut in. "Or, could be our captain's interested in more 'an being touched by the power of the bald lady. I bet he's got touching of his own in mind—eh, Captain?"

Fox murmured something I couldn't hear.

Moore continued before I could concoct a response. "I been watchin' you, sir. Cause I wasn't goin' into this bloody assignment with some nutter prayin' to the Witch half the night."

Fox's eyes were ice. "You ought to learn how to bite your fat tongue, Moore."

He smirked. "You blokes make me laugh. Sure, I get it, *the Daughter* an' all 'at. Keep your pendants. Fine with me. For our DC—all those rumors about him weren't *resting* well with me."

"Yeah? *You're* starting not to rest well with me," she hissed.

Force doesn't give us enough psychology training. The Brit was edging to the line of insubordination. And pissing right next to it. If I cut in too soon, I'd appear weak for taking the bait. Too late, and a brawl might break out.

"But all's brilliant, mates." His grin broadened. *Did he wink?* "Been watchin' him. Our captain ain't no choirboy. Not longing to take a needle blast for her. He's gagging for something else. Arse over tits or I'm blind. I know when a man's 'bout to pitch his tent!"

I knew the slang and felt my cheeks flush. I was glad I was dark enough in this light for it to go unnoticed.

"She *is* fit, mate, long's you don't mind her head."

Fox stood, but before she could engage Moore, he was up in my face. The others tensed. I kept still in front of his bulk and didn't flinch, staring him in the face.

He saluted. "Religion of heavenly bodies. Sign me up!"

Laughter followed. I smiled from one side of my mouth. This bruiser was sharp as a tack. With one short diversion, he derailed Kim's panic and lessened any threat from my personal feelings.

It was an acceptable trade. Take a little embarrassment for some humanization and team bonding. But I'd have to watch him and Fox. A bad mix brewing.

"You're enlisted," I said. "Now, sit down, soldier."

"Yes, sir!" Moore grinned back and turned around, taking a seat.

The others relaxed. Kim exhaled. Fox sat as well, but her eyes smoldered.

Williams shook her head. "*Shit*. I'm in deep with a bunch of crazies. Okay then, Captain. Why don't you light up the board and show us the new squid tech. Sounds like we might be needing it."

Chapter 9

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

Clarke's Third Law

Waythrel entered the quarters as we finished packing our gear. We formed a semicircle around the alien. A being so unsettling elicited primitive responses that were hard to suppress.

The Xix did make an impression. It towered over us. Its limbs moved at angles impossible for an Earth animal. A sharp intelligence radiated from the monstrosity. So did smells, unnatural and disturbing. The creature commanded our attention without a word.

"The caravan is prepared for you," Waythrel said. "There is a military-grade sandglider that will hold you and your items."

I stepped forward. "I was led to understand our suits will be waiting for us at the Temple?"

"This is correct. However, these will be different mechs, not

those you had shipped. We have built enhanced versions of the MECHcore standard. They are optimized both for the desert and for our latest battle techniques. Part of your initial exercises will be to integrate with the redesigned equipment. To appreciate their full potential."

I heard some quiet grumbling behind me. New chassis. Unusual training. Exceptional assignments. *Don't move a soldier's cheese, Xixian!*

"The suit improvements are significant. Ambra wishes her Guardians to be outfitted in the best available."

I made a short bow. It was hard to argue with those sentiments. The Xix gestured outside our quarters, and we followed it into the blazing sun.

The glider hovered in front of us, silent over the sands. The sole evidence of its propulsion system was an undulating ripple in the sea of grains. Aerodynamic and big as a bus, its sleek design screamed alien tech. The upper portion was transparent. Not glass. Another material our guests from space had produced. I assumed strong, more resistant to erosion than human materials science could achieve. Touch displays and control features glittered along the contours of the capsid.

We tossed our bags into the back, hopped into the central region, and buckled in. The cab consisted of seating appropriate for humans and Xix. Waythrel occupied one of the grander chairs. Within moments, I felt the lurch of acceleration, and the glider darted like an arrow from the Fourth City.

Our sand ship reached the velocities of high-speed rail. The air displacement left a tunnel of swirling grains behind us. Speeding inward from the ring of the Six Cities to the Temple, the structures of civilization vanished. The colors and shapes of the deep desert dominated our vision.

The transport glided over the colossal dunes, some reaching hundreds of meters. It scaled the long windward sides. Hopping

the crest, it launched over slip faces to valleys between the tan mountains. With the morning sun on the horizon, those canyons would plunge us into darkness and shadow. We burst into blinding light again, climbing another dune. All this at stunning speeds. The expansive windows made sense. It was a hell of a show.

The hills gave way as we flew over an extended sand sheet. We neared the center of the Sahara, equidistant from all inhabited regions of the Six Cities. We were about as in the middle of nowhere as anyone could be on Earth outside an ocean.

The craft skimmed the flat terrain, and I glimpsed blurred outlines of a massive structure ahead. Geography lessons ruled out giant dunes or mountains. The looming shadow in the sky was something intelligence had thrown up from the desert floor. Thrown up very high.

"There it is, Captain," came the voice of Williams, her neck stretched toward the growing outline in front of us. "There's your Temple."

My team stared at the marvel. As the dark shape took form, my skin tingled. Not only from its sheer size and location, but also for what this place meant to humanity. Here was the focal point in our war against cosmic forces that should have consumed our primitive species. If not for the help of the Xix. If not for the unexpected wild card in the history of our galaxy that was Ambra Dawn.

Marshall whistled. "All this power in the middle of nothing."

Waythrel's eyes turned toward us. "Many have wondered why we chose to build in the depths of the desert." The tones from the translator grew in mystery as we approached the Temple.

Moore scoffed. "Because the squids want sand between their toes is what I heard." He was slumped next to Kim, chin on his massive chest, impervious to the spectacle before him. Dark smart-glasses concealed his eyes.

"Yes, Sergeant," came the voice of the alien. "We are certainly partial to such locations, if not to xenophobic epithets. We do earnestly seek to work with our human hosts. We understand that these climates are extreme for your organism."

Moore flipped his shades up and smiled. "Extreme for our organism. I like it."

"If not for Xixian comfort, then what?" Williams asked.

Waythrel's bobbing eyes scanned my team, a few of them never leaving their focus on me. "From the beginning, after the recursive time alteration of the Calamity, New Earth has been in considerable danger. Greater than most humans have appreciated. Especially in the early years, we lived under the constant threat of attack by the Dram. In fact, we repelled many attempts—major, planetary-level assaults—to achieve again what had been undone."

This had my team's attention. Definitely *not* textbook material.

Kim broke in. "You mean like the asteroid? They shot more at us?"

"There were multiple campaigns through various strategies to destroy your planet. Or render it inhospitable. Similar attacks occurred on my homeworld, as well as several other worlds harboring species important to our war effort. All were countered."

"The Daughter?" I asked.

Waythrel gestured with its hands. "Of course, Captain Ratava. The powers of Ambra Dawn alone have shielded us from certain destruction."

"So, why didn't we ever hear about this?" asked Kim.

"Representatives of your many governments begged us to keep silent. They feared that word of the continuing efforts of our enemies could instill a planetwide panic."

These facts sat quietly with each of us. We all had studied the

Calamity. The alternative history of the planet in which the Dram had reduced it to slag by hurling a giant asteroid through an Orb.

No stories about additional, world-threatening attempts were taught. Instead, we learned of the alliances against the Hegemony. The long hundred years of continuous but victorious war. A conflict where we had broken their stranglehold on the galaxy, pushed the bugs back to a few systems near their homeworld. It was a tidy myth. Told across the globe in every schoolhouse. Perhaps for some of the same reasons the recent setbacks were withheld.

"Because of these threats, the Daughter insisted that we place the Temple as far from human habitation as possible. Thus, should an attack succeed, even a minor one, the carnage to life on Earth would be minimized as much as could be managed."

"So why not leave the bloody thing on the moon where it was built?" asked Moore.

"Indeed, this was her wish. However, we had seen what isolation from your planet had done to individuals of your species. To Ambra in particular. We convinced her that it was in the interests of our struggle to relocate to her homeworld. The Sahara was her compromise." The Xix paused, its smaller fingers darting around. "In addition, we needed to build a new device to amplify her powers and integrate the Reader groups. The one on your moon was effective, but served as a first draft, as you say. A prototype. We learned much from its building and use. We put such knowledge into practice here in your world's largest desert."

"The Dish," I said.

"Yes. It is an engineering feat dwarfing the efforts on your satellite. Most of the mass of the Temple is contained in the structure, which spans the size of some of your larger cities."

The dark blur in front of us clarified. It was like approaching Manhattan in a low-flying airplane, where the expanse of the city

filled the entire field of vision. Instead of skyscrapers, a monolith stretched to the sky from the desert floor.

"My God," gasped Kim as he stood in his seat against the restraints.

"They said it was tall. I've seen the numbers, but nothing's gonna prepare you for *that*," said Williams, her mouth agape.

Rising out of the sands like some webbed volcano was the colossal antenna of the Dish. Of course, the Xix had built it. Nothing close to the scale of such a structure existed in human engineering. Its height was impossible, beyond the grasp of intuition. It dwarfed anything on New Earth. Staring up, I lost all sense of proportion.

"It reaches over fifteen kilometers," said Waythrel. "Twice the altitude of your tallest mountain."

Moore perked up a little and peeked through his shades. "How you keep the giant todger from falling down?" he asked.

The alien pointed to a lower portion of the construction.

"Do you see how broad the base is? It is difficult to appreciate from this distance. It is as wide as it is high and anchored several thousand meters into the desert floor. This provides considerable support. The rods curve up from the foundation like parabolic spokes. They are fashioned from our strongest and most lightweight materials, millions of times stronger per unit mass than your best composites."

Extending radially from the huge entity were much smaller buildings of recognizable height. These were living quarters and other constructions serving the needs of the Temple. It was hard to focus on them. The antenna seized all attention.

The ground below us transformed from the tan sands to a black gloss. I recognized the planet's largest solar array in the giant circular mat flowing across the desert. The term *array* was archaic, as the material was more a continuous sheet rather than thousands of individual panels. The glider sped over a dark and still sea.

"It's beautiful," said Fox, her eyes watery.

"Amazing," I said, marveling as well. "This is what powers the Dish?"

"No," said Waythrel. "The Dish requires much more energy."

"Like those astronomy antennae," said Kim, staring up at the tall structure. "Focuses all her power like radio waves or something?"

The alien gestured in an inhuman manner. "It is difficult to explain. There is a superficial similarity with such instruments. The operating principle, in contrast, is quite different. Your telescopes process electromagnetic radiation of specific energies. Ambra's manipulations of space and time occur through distinct physical means. This is why the Dish is so giant, and also why it drains so much energy to operate. To focus her powers requires a gravitational lens created through the use of a micro black hole."

"You're shitting us!" exclaimed Kim, a nervous smile on his face. "You've got a damn black hole in there?"

Waythrel's voice was calm. "Four."

"Holy *shit!* Well, I'm with you on the vote for the desert location now, for sure."

"The black holes are located in strategic positions," added the alien. "One is at the top of the tower. The spacetime distortions they create are channeled by other devices, the three-space cross section focusing beneath the sands in the bedrock. It is there that Ambra goes when she requires a significant amplification of her powers."

"How do you juice all this?" asked Moore. He had flipped his glasses back down.

"If you mean the energetics, Sergeant, we have an array of twenty reactors built around the Temple."

"*Twenty*?" said Williams. "So why do you need all the sun power?"

"The fusion cores are devoted exclusively to powering of the

Dish and the maintenance of the black-hole amplituhedron. Both require enormous energy expenditures. The solar sea is in place to provide for all the organism-related activities. Life support, communications, standard military defenses."

The antenna now towered above us, so high I'd have to lie flat to stare up at it. If an event horizon lurked at the apex, we were going to have to take the alien's word for it. The top was invisible.

The glider decelerated. We plunged into shadow again as we pulled alongside the habitat's buildings. They were small in comparison to the central tower but still had many stories. Their walls blocked the early morning sun.

The craft stopped in front of an extensive courtyard. A broad street extended from it and the outer desert into the Temple City itself. For the first time, we saw green in the Sahara. The entrance was lined with olive and palm trees. Some thorny bushes bore flowers. While the plants were arid species, they required significant irrigation to keep them alive in this wasteland. The Daughter had her gardeners.

We released the restraints and assembled, filing out to the cargo section to grab our gear. Waythrel exited and headed away from the craft. I hoisted my duffel bag over my shoulder, waiting until the rest of my team had secured their items. We marched in the direction the alien had taken.

We stepped alongside the sandglider, its bulk rising above our heads on the right. The Daughter's counselor had turned around the front of the ship, lost from sight, a trail in the sand marking its path. I picked up the pace to keep up.

We made the same turn past the nose of the craft and ran into a greeting party. It was far larger and more diverse than the one at the Fourth City. Thirty to forty humans and half as many Xix awaited our approach. They dressed in flowing desert garments of myriad colors. Eyestalk clusters danced here and there above the shorter sea of human heads.

Waythrel reached the crowd and stopped, speaking to a central figure. The sun crested over the tops of the buildings, and the courtyard erupted in light. My smartglasses engaged and reduced the glare.

Seized with compulsion, I stepped forward. My brain relegated reason to some distant region of my consciousness. A mindless moth to the flame, the shape underneath the height of the alien attracted me. Step by drunken step, I approached, oblivious to everything else.

It was a young woman, clothed in long robes of black, her skin as bright as the white walls lit by the morning sun. The top of her head was bald and swollen to obscene proportions. Rivers of red curls fell from a midpoint in her scalp down her shoulders and to her waist.

"*Daughter of Time*," I whispered.

It was Ambra Dawn.

Chapter 10

What then is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know.

Augustine of Hippo

Time.

Whatever the idea represents, if anything at all in the reality of our universe, it stopped. No sound. No movement. The sand particles hovered in midair. My own heart ceased its rhythm in my chest.

Her eyes.

Blind eyes. Bright-green emeralds glowing before me. They moved. Everything else froze in an impossible stillness. Her eyes turned to me and focused, plunging into my own. I was bathed in light. A subtle impact rippled through my awareness. She had entered into my consciousness.

Textbooks note the Daughter distorts the field of time near her. Physics instruction I didn't understand. The science-fiction serials waved through the datasphere—they all said something

about it. She arrested time. She slowed time. She stood outside time in some undefined *elsewhere.* None of the writings agreed on what she did to time. Now it was clear to me those stories were much more than legends.

Standing before me, commanding all my attention and thoughts in the midst of all these creatures, was a human being who was almost three hundred years old. And she didn't look a day older than seventeen. No wrinkles, no skin discoloration, no gray hair or sagging posture. Ambra Dawn was the same biological age she had been when she came into full use of her powers.

I didn't understand it. None of my fellow students at the academy had understood the content. Explanations of cyclically warped spacetime. Recursive loops of causality that left chemistry intact yet her body unaged. How time hiccuped, but memories formed. Or how her consciousness looped through carbon-based flesh into hyperknots of continuum strings.

For me, it was all gibberish. In this space, her gaze penetrated me like a vulnerable lover. The nonsense of understanding mattered little. I wished to stay. To forever have her dive into me, consume me. To endlessly experience her in this impossible locus with no time. To show Ambra my boundless adoration.

Be patient, Nitin. We'll discover a better place.

The words rang in my mind as if I had thought them, but the voice wasn't my own. Her eyes held me a moment longer, and I felt tears trickle down the side of my face.

A fist struck my stomach. Time leaped. The noises and smells returned, the grains rasping across my skin. Voices, footsteps. A murmuring crowd.

I stood halfway between my team and the welcoming party. The blowing sand crusted the tear paths on my cheeks. Wide eyes gawked at me, and Ambra smiled.

"Captain Ratava, please bring your people forward," she called

over the wind. The murmurs died at the sound of her voice. The stares lingered.

I glanced backwards to see shocked expressions from my crew. Stunned, they stumbled with me, and we came to a halt in front of the Daughter and Waythrel.

"We welcome you to the Temple," she said. "We appreciate your service and sacrifice for our common mission to protect New Earth."

I examined the crowd. Smiles and steady gazes. These weren't political platitudes, but true words for those before us. I glimpsed the earnestness in their faces. They served her with their full being, with a devotion I'd never encountered. I remembered the Hindu monks I had known in my youth, but they provided a pale comparison.

Her blind eyes crossed over my form as a lightning strike, producing shivers.

"I am needed urgently within, so I will not be able to be with you as you enter our city. Instead, I'll turn you over to the capable hands of my counselor, Sepehr Mazandarani. He will serve as your guide, your point of contact, for the next few weeks as you prepare for Guardian service." She gestured behind her, and a short, thin man in indigo robes stepped forward.

His complexion was dark, his eyes a deep brown with a dagger's gaze. A trimmed and sharp goatee accentuated a diabolical appearance. He shuffled with a casual confidence until he was beside the Daughter.

"Sepehr." Ambra bowed to the Iranian and turned around, walking alongside Waythrel on the road into the Temple City.

"Hello. From me as well, welcome." Mazandarani scanned my team, pausing on me. His eyes squinted, his mouth in a tight line. The warm invitation dissolved. "You will be staying at the south end of the barracks, near the military training fields. There you will find housing and your new battle suits. Trained Earth Force

soldiers will work with you to get you up to speed. Inside, we walk whenever possible—it keeps us well adapted to the climate. Please follow me. Your quarters are about a half hour away."

He grinned, with striations in his jaw, and turned down the same entry road as the Daughter. Ambra and Waythrel were now out of sight, and it was unclear where they had gone.

I glanced at my team and smiled. "Okay, here we go." A pause. No one moved. My grin faded. "Problem?"

Moore let out a bark of a laugh. "Yeah. You might say."

The others didn't elaborate.

"Warrant Officer Williams. Would you then kindly explain why we aren't marching inside?"

"Yes, sir," she said, bringing her face close to mine. "That is, if you can explain what the hell just happened."

"What happened? We were met by Ambra Dawn herself and assigned to her representative. We're following him to begin our required duties."

"I don't mean that." She stared at me. The rest gawked as well, Fox with wide eyes, clutching her pendant.

Moore chimed in. "She's a bit put out from your shimmering disappearing act."

My throat felt dry. "My what?"

He laughed again. "You know, the part where you blink in and out of existence and teleport halfway to that would-be girlfriend of yours." He checked with the others. "About cover it?"

No one said anything. Their eyes spoke plenty.

"Yeah, see lads, we've not all gone bloody barmy in the heat. We all saw it." He hoisted his duffel. "I think we'd all like to hear your thoughts on the matter, Captain."

I stared back at them.

Chapter 11

The easy confidence with which I know another man's religion is folly teaches me to suspect that my own is also.

Mark Twain

It was three weeks before I saw Ambra Dawn again.

I threw myself into the training and drills. My team members were hardworking soldiers, but I outworked them all. My energies burned with a zeal no one else could match, and the group worked that much harder due to my example. Because of what we would soon face, it was critical we did.

The firehose of information we withstood preserved my sanity. Constant activity distracted me from the incident at the gates. I didn't understand what had happened, and questions gnawed at me whenever I had a moment to think. The few conversations with my team left us unsatisfied. Nothing was clarified.

Except perhaps for Fox, who bent all events to her faith. After witnessing a miracle firsthand, she began earnest conversion efforts.

"So, now," she said, staring around at us on the training field. "Now do you believe?"

A battle suit encased half her torso, her black hair billowed behind her in the scalding wind. The composite chassis drank the sunlight, charging power reserves planted in the back.

We had finished an exhausting session. Sweat poured down our faces and ran in rivulets into our mechs. The new tech sopped it up, filtered it, and stored the potable constituents for later use. The breeze did little to cool us.

The team clustered in a tight group. A wasted sandworm triad lay smoking before us. The redesigned suits were incredible. A jump in performance of four or five generations. They combined innovative battle methods with eco-survival adaptations for the desert. The enhanced AI for the dance was far more sophisticated, and we'd mastered the interface. With the supercharged ion slingers, it almost made taking on the worms fun.

Kim shuffled his feet, inclining his head to our engineer. "Yeah," he exhaled, his fatigue evident. "I guess so."

I could see in the eyes of the others that he wasn't alone. But acceptance of the event was one thing. Interpretation, another.

"Well, it's not anything new to hear she can pull out her magic wand," spat Moore. "It don't mean I'm getting baptized."

Fox shook her head. She chanted, "In this age were holy signs, but many disbelieved. And the Daughter said, 'If you believed not in Moses and Jesus, then you will believe not in Me.'"

He burst out laughing. "You think the Witch actually said any of that?"

She stepped toward him.

"Enough!" I said, engaging the hydraulics of my suit to push them apart. "Keep your beliefs private. We have one fight we need to focus on, and it's not with our species."

"Yeah, but, you know, there's been an *event*. With the Ambra

Dawn." It was Kim. I heard a growing awe in his voice. "We saw it. *You* were part of it. It's like all the legends, man."

Strange things had happened that defied the laws of nature. But this development had centered not on New Earth or the Great War with the Dram. Not some other textbook-worthy crisis concerning the Daughter and humanity's survival. It had focused on a single person out of all the swarm of humanity. *On me.*

"It was one thing when you were such a fanboy, Captain," said Williams. "Now? What is it with you and her?"

"I don't know. Nothing about her is normal, right? Well, I'm part of it. Millions worship her."

"Yeah, but you don't," said the Brit.

"Sergeant, I don't know what people should call it. I know what I feel. I'm not a Dawnist. I'm not a skeptic. I know where I have to be, and it's here. With her."

Fox tilted her head. "I understand. You're like a monk. You're devoted to her."

"He ain't no monk." Moore smirked.

She glared at him. "I bet he's never been with another woman. Never been in love. He's waiting for *her*."

Kim's eyebrows jumped. "That true, sir? Not to be too personal, but we're all getting past that line, I think. Is this thing with her so extreme? Have you ever kissed a girl?"

Always the same. Of all the unusual aspects of my devotion to the Daughter, it was sex that riled people up the most. I could have painted myself up like the wildest Hindu priest. Chanted into the night on the top of a pillar, and it would go down better than abstinence. Or the perception of it.

"More than that. Engaged once. I think I loved her." I inhaled, dampening my emotions.

The smooth alto of Williams broke the silence. "What happened?"

I stared out over the desert. I couldn't make eye contact for this.

"My parents arranged it all. They'd been trying to marry me off for a while. You can imagine how they felt with my long focus on the Daughter. These things were usually awkward, pointless, and over before the dessert." I suppressed a sigh. "Not the last one."

Her face danced in my memory. Delicate bones, with a Persian nose and rich black hair like a strong river. She was petite, elegant in her motions, and quick with her wit.

"She was a professional dancer. Classical Indian style. Her eyes caught me over the table, and we had an immediate mutual chemistry. Body, mind, all that. I abandoned the idea of a destiny with the Daughter." I laughed. "Of course, I had a lot of help from my parents. They were beyond overjoyed to recognize that this woman hooked me."

"So what *happened*?" pressed Fox.

"I broke it off."

"Why?" asked Kim.

"Because it was wrong. I'd convinced myself to grow up, move past my lifelong dream. But it was self-deception. I couldn't let go of Ambra Dawn. I loved this beautiful woman and planned a life with her. But my feelings weren't pure, not devoted as they should have been to my wife-to-be. She deserved so much more. I saw I'd forever be haunted by another. Nothing I could do would change it. It wasn't fair to anyone, but it was more unfair to pretend. I knew it'd cause more pain to keep it going. So I ended it."

"Didn't peg you for a heartbreaker, Captain," said Williams.

I stared into the distance. "It might not make sense, but there is love, and then there's another kind of devotion. One transcending the two involved. And yes, maybe it's madness."

"Well, she *did* single you out, sir," said Kim.

It is one thing to feel a reality within yourself. Quite another to have the external world verify it with public drama.

Marshall agreed. "There's some strange destiny going on."

And I heard her voice.

Something I couldn't share with my team. Psychologists could supply reasons why I'd been delusional. The entire episode could have been a cognitive reaction to the time distortion. Perhaps some shrink would claim it was the beginning of a split personality disorder.

It didn't matter. I *knew* in my heart Ambra Dawn had spoken to me. The experience was as real, more true, than many events in my life. As tangible as my own awareness. The Daughter was said to be telepathic, to be able to enter the minds and control the thoughts of others. She had touched my mind. I was sure of it.

With that conviction, I longed for more. To interact again. To discover my purpose here. Her absence grew to a terrible vacuum in a space that had not existed before. She had entered and spoken to me. In the fertile landscape of my adoration, a nascent mini-universe gestated. What would it become?

And when?

I pulled myself to the present. I needed to get the team to move on from this.

"So we've gotten some real-world confirmation of everything we've been taught. Not on a holo, not from our elders, but in our faces. In the sands in front of us." I held each in turn with my gaze. "Things a lot bigger than us are going on. Let's take it to heart and let's get serious about why we're here. The myths aren't lies."

The group sobered. Moore's smirk vanished.

Of course, it returned with another wink. "Right, Captain. And you can hope to get a little more *serious* with the girl yourself, since you've moved up to teleporting with her."

I turned away and put my helmet back on. More worms were coming.

Chapter 12

All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when we are able to attack, we seem unable; when using our forces, we appear inactive; when we are close, we convince the enemy we are far away; when distant, we make him believe we are near.

The Art of War, Sun Tzu 孫子

We received a briefing on our unusual assignment at the end of the first week. The team had finished a particularly grueling skirmish. A captured triad released in the sands was always a challenge, but that was the setting for an advanced lesson. We were testing the newest feature of the redesigned MECHcore suits—spacetime neutralizers. Command gave us no explanation for why we would need such countermeasures. Of course, those design elements had our minds racing.

Accompanying the worms were field distortions in reality. Left uncountered, they slowed us down. Displaced us in location or time. It didn't require to be much in the heat of battle to be lethal.

Our mechs countered the effects, but it required a change in our fighting style. A strange rhythm, pulse in our movements, actions, thoughts. Mental shifts that are hard to describe. When chronology and position jerk around, the sensations and responses are counterintuitive.

We spent a long day in drills to master the new combat mode. Mazandarani arrived later to escort us back to the military barracks. We followed, cleaned up, and he brought us to a conference room in a nearby building. There we were introduced to Tomoko Mizoguchi.

The major reminded me of Colonel Snowden, as much as a diminutive Japanese woman could of that giant. She seemed to step out of some ancient war holo. The older warrior spoke in clipped cadence, full of bluster and drama, and eager to put fools in their place. Her short salt-and-pepper hair spiked away from her skull. She wore a pressed uniform sharpened like a knife.

We gathered from Mazandarani that she had been at the Temple for over a decade. She ran engagements with the Daughter and Xixian forces at various locations in the galaxy. These roles had been kept hidden outside the Six Cities. None of my team had heard of her, but over the next three weeks, we heard a lot from her. The voice that erupted from her short frame resonated through the room.

"You may *think* you know what you are up against. Let me tell you, you don't."

Our group of experienced MECHcore soldiers had seen combat with the enemy on a dozen worlds. She led with a heck of an opening.

"The tide of the war has changed," she growled. "We are no longer on the offensive but are now in a full-scale retreat across the galaxy."

We sat in stunned silence. Far worse than anything Colonel Snowden had hinted at. *What the hell was happening?*

"From last month, we have lost control of the Time Tree. The Dram have occupied the central Orb projection. Their forces are launching attacks against weakly defended worlds in the alliance. Most of those have been devastating."

I glanced at Williams, seated on my right side. Her eyes told the story—disbelief, shock, and fear. She held my gaze for a moment and shook her head, returning her attention to the briefing.

"It is obvious something has catalyzed this phase transition in the war. The nature of this catalyst has become the focus of much of our current efforts. It is in this respect you have been recruited here."

She paused, her eyes dissecting us. Her bright eyes stopped last and longest on me.

"Your training should finish before the end of the month. There will be an important announcement during the Festival of Rebirth. The Daughter will address the faithful of the Temple City, broadcast a message to the world. We have notified all the major political and media leaders."

She waited again, and I couldn't stop myself from interrupting her narrative.

"What will she say?"

She motioned to a projection holo of the galaxy. Several bright points appeared across its expanse. I recognized them as the location of extrasolar Time Spheres. Or rather, as the Ambra Dawn had revealed, the projections of the one Orb. With a touch on the screen, many of the white dots changed color.

"In red, you see those systems now occupied by enemy forces."

We sat in stunned silence. It is difficult to explain to you of another time what this meant. Your contemporaries learned the maps of Old Earth. You considered distances and meanings of national borders. Your hometown. You cannot grasp the size of

the galaxy. You weren't raised on the century-old atlas of the Dram Quarantine choking their home planet.

That chart was burned into the consciousness of generations. We knew where our foes resided, the handful of satellite worlds remaining under their control. It was a small percentage, a testament to our victory in the Great War.

No longer. In the holo presented by the major, half the star systems glowed red. She flicked her hand, and the map rotated. The viewpoint zoomed to the galactic center, New Earth shooting to the back of the room. She focused on the interior Orb.

"Their attack was long planned. Once they seized the central Time Point, strikes across the Time Tree occurred. Every system targeted has fallen."

"Oh, my God," said Kim behind me.

"Our forces find themselves unable to repel the attacks. Hardly able to communicate anything useful about them. We only have strange reports, contradictory statements. Even the Xix do not know how to interpret the data."

"What do they say?" I asked.

"We will provide you with the information obtained. We want you to study it. Brainstorm. Prepare for the unexpected."

She touched several floating buttons on the holopanel. The room filled with a poor-quality holovid. White noise and audio static clouded the projection, but the scene was one of battle. A human communications officer spoke. Her jaw was set, her eyes narrow in the chaos of explosions and screams.

"Freighter Centari 2-11658. Mayday, mayday, mayday. Escort battalion destroyed. We are defenseless and taking fire from enemy forces."

A blinding light flashed with a deep sound. The image disintegrated into random pixels. It flickered back, and the woman transmitted from in front of a raging inferno.

"Life support is failing. Beyond salvage. Initiating terminal data squirt."

A *TDS*. When your ship was going down. When it was clear there might not be anything to recover. If you had the presence of mind to send information to relay beacons, to inform and warn, you would spend your last few moments firing one off. It would likely drain whatever you had left in the ship's batteries—the signal was designed to reach the relays. It would render you helpless. It was a final act. The officer saw her imminent death. It was on her face, the steel in her eyes.

Her hand paused in the air. She hadn't sent the message. She had something she needed to say.

"This is Operations Specialist Emma Sung. Watch for the *shadows*. The *ghosts*. I can't explain any better."

Her finger moved. The image froze.

Mizoguchi gestured to the holo. "The last contact from a transport convoy destroyed three weeks ago by Dram forces. Data recovery confirms the visuals. The ship was seconds away from coming apart. She was one cool customer."

"Or delusional and psychotic," said Marshall. "*Ghosts?*"

The major glowered at the medic. "Yes, it might seem. Except we have other TDS signals in recent months. All from devastating attacks on our deployments, and in several of them are reports sounding a lot like this one."

"What do you mean?" asked Williams.

"All report strange events. Creatures or powers penetrating all their defenses. Wreaking destruction on their personnel and machinery. Entities *not* Dram."

"Not the bugs?" asked Moore, his lip a sneer. "*Ghosts?*"

"Ghosts, Sergeant. Or shadows. Gas clouds. Force fields. Whatever you want. Different terms for the same phenomenon, it would appear."

He continued. "So, you're saying what has cost us territory

across the galaxy, maybe lost us the whole fucking war, is a bunch of evil spirits attacking our ships?"

Mizoguchi shook her head. "What I'm telling you is that something has changed. Our enemies have a new weapon we do not understand and cannot counter."

"That's why we're here?" I hardly knew what to expect.

The major grunted. "We have a crisis. One that must be addressed immediately, or we may lose everything. The Daughter and her advisors have devised a plan. It is not a large-scale military engagement. We now know such efforts would be futile until we can dissect this threat."

"Then what?" asked Fox, her eyes narrowing.

"Guerrilla tactics. We will transport elite forces teams to several key locations in the Time Tree. These groups will be charged with two missions. The first is recon: find out what the hell we are up against and how to respond."

"The second?" I asked.

The map reappeared, the Dram-controlled scarlet sea ominous in the darkness. Three points grew in size and brightness.

"Sabotage. The Daughter has identified a critical set of nodes in the hyperspace paths. Congruences to impede. This will seal off the accessible routes to the regions we still control."

Thin blue lines connecting the Orbs appeared on the screen. They outlined the possible circuits through the Strings. When Mizoguchi pressed the highlighted positions, the web of interconnections disintegrated. The red area glowed alone.

"Removing String access, we isolate our foes in the vast interstellar distances."

"Won't this cut off many worlds depending on our protection?" asked Fox, her mouth gaping.

"Yes," said the major. "It cannot be avoided."

Marshall's hands were at his temples. "What will happen to them?"

"We don't know. They could be attacked. Or perhaps, with them isolated, our adversaries will focus on how to deal with the setback. But losing contact with intergalactic trade will precipitate food and energy catastrophes."

I probed further. "We have to hit all three of those points? Does the order matter?"

"No. However, doing them in sequence could result in the Dram deducing our purpose. This might lead to fortifications of the Orb projections in those systems."

"So we go in with multiple teams at the same time?"

"No," said the major. "There will be a single team."

"If they fortify the last two, it doesn't make sense," said Kim.

"It does if you understand the limitations of the engagement," barked Mizoguchi. "We can't send normal forces."

"Why not?" I asked.

"We have tried. We performed seven missions to various Orbs early on. None of them returned."

"Jesus." Moore whistled. "So a suicide mission."

"Perhaps not. Because those other operations lacked a critical element you will have."

No, they can't. My stomach lurched. "And what would that be, sir?"

"Ambra Dawn."

Fox gasped. "*The Daughter?*"

The major grunted.

Moore slapped his hands together. "Now that's worth signing up for! This whole *assignment* just got a hell of a lot more interesting!"

"Wait. We're missing something here," said Kim. "How are we supposed to get back once we take those nodes out? We'll be cut off, too!"

Mizoguchi waved him away. "You forget she doesn't need to travel through the Time Tree. She can open the Orbs."

Ancient history was becoming our practical reality.

She continued. "This decision is not a light one. Our safety has depended on her for two centuries. Our greatest battles fought through her. We have locked her behind protective walls. Those barriers keep her from fighting where she is needed. And they are no longer as safe as we once thought."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"In addition to the nebulous threat our reports have brought to us, there is a far less vague one. A danger we anticipated. One that was sure to occur, although the day on which it would, was unknown. A peril to the Daughter herself."

"*What threat?*" I snapped.

"False Dawns, Captain Ratava. Biological clones of Ambra Dawn. Constructed from her eggs. Stolen when she was a prisoner on the enemy homeworld two hundred years ago. Ova used to create, to breed, to engineer *replicas,* recapitulating her powers."

"Is this for real?" asked Kim, his face scrunched.

"Reports and documentation of those attacks have now surfaced from several battle fronts. Images of a young woman. She resembles the Daughter. She opens spacetime wormholes and enters combat against our forces."

"*False Dawns?*" I repeated, my lips numb, the world spinning.

"How many do they have?" asked Williams, her voice still and quiet.

"We don't know."

"You don't *know*?" Kim blurted. "You mean they could have an army of them?"

"Unlikely. What they have achieved is a technical challenge. The Xix claim it is beyond their own technology, given the instability of human chromosomes. Then there is the trickier problem of randomness in neurological development. It's hard to breed an Ambra Dawn. Then you have to raise one. There is psychology,

tumor growth, and many variables an alien race would have extreme difficulty with."

Moore shook his head. "Unlikely, but not unlikely enough."

"They may have had help," said the major.

"From who?" he asked.

"It's guesswork, but let us consider the facts. After centuries of devastating losses, the Dram counter with two breakthroughs in this war. Both are beyond anything they have ever done."

Fox cut in. "A species with tech better than on Xix? There's nothing like that in our galaxy. Who are they? Where are they coming from?"

"Another galaxy?" offered Kim.

"No," I said. "Only ours has the Orbs. We're isolated from other galaxies. There's no intergalactic travel."

"So far as we know," added Moore.

"Again, speculation," said Mizoguchi. "However, it is the leading theory in the Daughter's advisory circles is that our enemies work with other forces. The Xix are convinced they cannot have achieved these advances by themselves."

Williams sat back in her chair. "S*hadows* and *ghosts* tearing apart our ships, and now, the Dram have replicated the powers of Ambra Dawn." She shook her head in the long silence.

The major grimaced and closed the holo. The room lights switched on, transporting us from the galactic depths to our small briefing room. From existential darkness to a mundane illumination. Her voice was cold.

"We no longer have a monopoly on manipulating space and time."

Chapter 13

We only have to look at ourselves to see how intelligent life might develop into something we wouldn't want to meet.

Stephen Hawking

It was one of the hotter days for the festival, and the crowds were huge. Most came from the Six Cities and Temple itself. They were devoted pilgrims who had dedicated their lives to the service of the Daughter. The rest arrived from around the world. These were the fortunate souls receiving visitation visas for the event. In total, fifty thousand people gathered to celebrate the salvation of New Earth.

It was a security nightmare.

Exceptional mission or not, we still handled patrol alongside other MECHcore groups. With an exception. Our assignment landed us at the gate where she would speak to the crowds. It was a duty of some prestige that bothered other teams with more seniority. Our unusual suits also distinguished us. While the Xix had intended the mechs to handle specific dangers, I still didn't mind

having one on me. After what we had learned recently, paranoia was at an all-time high.

I tried to keep a lighter heart and not think about the dark facts of the conflict. The Festival of Rebirth was the anniversary of the beginning of the Great War. It commemorated the salvation of our world and our emancipation from the tyranny of alien masters.

It was also the education of the entire populace. After the reversal of the Calamity, a New Earth really was born. One of a different time path in which the planet wasn't destroyed by the emperor. Humanity now shared a vague vision of annihilation, of horror unmade. A teaming population woke from a dream, discerning the reality of their slavery. That awakening sparked a global war to purge the Dram and their agents.

We won. We pressed our rebellion with the help of Ambra and the Xix throughout the galaxy. A terrible dictatorship based on fear and death was removed and thousands of worlds freed.

The Festival of Rebirth was still raw and real to our species. It was the greatest holiday on the planet. Few merely went through the motions. Many would make the pilgrimage to the Temple at least once in their lifetimes. Billions would watch the proceedings as it was broadcast to each gridpoint on the globe. Dawnists would worship. Skeptics would mock. Separatists would protest, and some would cross the line into terrorism. It was the same every year.

Except we knew, this year, things weren't going to be the same.

How would the masses react, on this day of all days, to the news the world might actually be ending after all? That our oppressors might hold the upper hand? Would there be panic? Would we come together? Would extremists grasp the outside threat, put down their arms, join the rest of the allied aliens? Or would they ramp up their claims of the Calamity hoax and the invasion of Earth by the Xix? I couldn't see the Terra First

diehards converting over a broadcast by the Daughter. They immediately assumed everything she said was a lie.

The stakes were high, and the presentation would rattle emotions. So our patrol wasn't an ordinary one at the Temple. We all felt the weight of events hanging over us.

In the middle of this anxiety, it was difficult to feel the joy of the day. I tried, despite the distractions. Hundreds of memories from childhood danced in my thoughts. Nights watching the Diwali lights relit for the Rebirth. A field trip to Dawn's Eyes, the Indian monument built by devout Hindus who took her as a contemporary avatar of God. Her face projected during the communion, when she reached from the Temple and shared her mind with Earth's Readers. Staring at the stars at night after the fireworks. Dreaming of her, imagining countless ways in which we would meet.

How could I know our actual meeting would be far more magical?

Most exciting was that I would be in her presence again when she spoke. This thought alone sent a wave of energy through me.

"MECHcore captains, this is Sepehr Mazandarani. Waythrel is now moving to the platform to introduce the Daughter. Please assume your secondary positions."

All the teams called back their affirmatives. On our select band, I made sure my group was in position. We were to be in front of the dignitaries and the largest crowds. The last thing I wanted was to miss any signs of terrorist activity.

"Roger, Captain," came Williams. "We're already there. Fox removed three civilians from the crowd earlier. Scans found weapons. Don't know how they got those in. Nothing in the databases about them. Not sure they were here to cause trouble, but they're eighty-sixed."

"Noted. Moore, how's the desert?"

"As fit for our bloody bones as it ever was, sir," he reported back. "Nothing growing, nothing moving."

"Marshall, status?"

"In position. Aid stations are operational and staffed. We've got a full triage unit as well. Ready for anything except a land war."

"Copy."

I picked up a swelling murmur from the crowd on the other communications bands.

"Waythrel is approaching."

Cheers rang for New Earth's most popular, and despised, alien life-form. A tall stand stood between the entrance garden of our arrival and the barren desert. It towered thirty feet above the ground with the crowds in front of it. A ramp from the main road into the Temple City ran along the back of the stage. Like some gymnastic octopus, the lanky Xix bounced forward onto the sloped platform. With its strange dexterity and speed, it was soon at the podium. Hologens captured the speaker and beamed it to projectors over the globe.

"Greetings, citizens of New Earth," it began. The amplification systems produced localized holosound encircling the crowd. A full minute of cheers and applause flooded the sands.

When it had died down, the alien continued. "We celebrate this New Year—273 AD. After Dawn. After a young woman stepped into a machine. It was an apparatus built not by members of her species, but by creatures strange, frightening to her. With enormous vulnerability, she placed her body into that threatening device. She opened her mind to share the consciousness of hundreds of others. Humans and nonhumans. They worked together in trust to achieve an exceptional purpose. As one, they unmade a terrible evil and birthed the beginning of a distinct timeline in the history of our galaxy."

Again, cheers and cries. The Xix weren't naive. I had no doubt

the translator was coloring the words with the kind of charisma needed for this speech. It didn't bother me. The alien spoke the truth, however artfully. I felt my own heart stirred. This reality was part of what drew me into the military in the first place—to defend our world, our lives, and that which was most precious.

"Captain?" It was Fox. "Unusual readings coming out of my tensor field monitors. Over."

"Say again?"

"Spacetime distortions flickering nearby, localizing to...the desert. You're not seeing this?"

Waythrel continued. "In those early days, New Earth united to fight a common foe, and we achieved momentous things together."

"Negative. I'm reading nothing."

The alien paused, its eyestalks scanning in multiple directions at once. "For hundreds of years, we have worked as one to keep a lasting peace in our galaxy."

"I'm getting it too, Captain," said Moore. "It's behind the crowd, centered several hundred meters out in the sands."

I was too far from the source. I raced forward, past the audience, my dash in the gleaming MECHcore suit drawing stares. "What the hell is it?"

"Not sure," said Fox. "Signal's growing off the charts."

My stomach knotted. Intuition took over. "M-teams, this is Captain Ratava. All available suits to the Temple entrance—immediately!"

I lowered the volume from the nonmilitary channels.

Waythrel's voice murmured in the background. "Now, the Daughter needs you once again to achieve unity, commitment, a devotion to a cause."

I reached the crowd and headed behind them. My instruments were picking it up now. Most of my team had assembled nearby, and the other groups were closing.

"You see *that*?" yelled Kim, pointing forward.

I stopped in midair, staring. "By the Dawn..."

The desert sands, the air above it, the dunes in the distance—all were distorted. Space was embedded in crystal-clear rubber and some giant's hand was pulling on the material in front of us. I heard Waythrel speak through the broadcast but no longer could focus on the words.

"Kim! Alert the Daughter's security team, now!" I switched to a broader transmission band. "All M-teams, *combat alert*. I repeat, combat alert! Possible security breach at alpha point 7. Over." I toggled communications back to my team. "We may not have long."

I was right. Acknowledgments echoed from the M-core teams as the distortions swirled into a vortex. The clear rubber imploded, plunging into itself.

"It's a portal," gasped Williams.

The small gyre morphed into a whirlpool. The diameter increased fivefold, spanning hundreds of meters. The clarity of the passage faded, and it took on a hideous black-and-violet hue with endless depth. The doorway had fused with a tunnel.

A blast of air struck us, kicking up a wave of dust accelerating outward and raining across the crowds. An electromagnetic pulse nearly shorted out our suits. The hologens weren't so lucky. They exploded. The broadcast failed. Waythrel's voice ended in mid-sentence. Through the thick chassis of my battle suit, I heard the faint sounds of people screaming.

Streams from suitcams flickered in the corners of my view screen. Thousands of faces angled toward us and the growing disturbance.

What held my gaze was the portal itself. The entrance turned pitch black. Out of the darkness poured a battalion of Dram troops like a plague of locusts.

The chaos began.

Chapter 14

There is an urge and rage in people to destroy, to kill, to murder. Until all mankind, without exception, undergoes a great change, wars will be waged. Everything that has been built up, cultivated and grown, will be destroyed and disfigured, after which mankind will have to begin all over again.

Anne Frank

The enemy outnumbered us, but our fifty MECHcore soldiers held their own. Outfitted with the new AI modules of the Xix, we brought considerable firepower to bear as well.

But we weren't prepared for this. A terrorist attack, perhaps a core of trained assassins. Not an invasion force. In all our combat drills, in all the sims and imagined encounters, none of them involved the opening of a spacetime portal at our feet.

And out of the wormhole came the worms. Ten or twelve triads and the escorting companies of insectile Dram infantry. We never determined the exact number, the carnage obscuring details.

They flooded the sand plains with weapons blazing. Assigned to the front of the festival activities, it was up to me to organize the response. I had moments to order our defenses.

"Equispaced grid assignments! All MECHcore units prepare for triad pairings. Commence AI maneuvers immediately!"

Williams fired back. "Captain, we have a solution—two triads!"

"*Two?*" We'd never engaged two. What was the crazy computer doing? No time to think. "Dance!"

Flechette rounds sprayed near us, but we dodged the needles. Our team locked into the algorithm, centering on the couple of triads—six worms in all—situated close to one another. It was one thing to buzz around with our thrusters orbiting one threesome. With two, it mimicked a crazed multi-star system with planets dancing between each ball of hydrogen. A wrong move and we'd be vaporized.

We whirled through a blinding geometrical nightmare. In our suits, at these speeds, the infantry was a nuisance, but we could handle those. We spun about the pair and blasted through their grunts with the ion slingers. Their charred forms littered the desert sands.

Most of our attention was on the worms. Despite taking on two, we held the advantage. The new AI was incredible. When they locked onto us, blasting a flechette round, the choreography left their guns off target. We closed in and readied the missiles.

"Confidence level reached, Captain," called Williams, her tone strained. A data read on my view screen told me she'd taken fire.

"Damage report, Officer."

"I've got a few minutes, sir. Give the order!"

"Take them down!"

We darted in and out of a mad fair ride. Now we would launch missile strikes from multiple directions. The height of insanity in any standard analysis. Until you have seen the dance,

watched the blinding intricacies of the movement, your ideas of what is sane in combat are out of date.

We fired. Old-school chemistry-based-propellant, dual-EMP/solid-explosive warheads. The EM pulse drilled a hole in any field defenses. The explosives completed the task. Twelve missiles launched, two per worm, and we rocketed away to avoid debris. The triads were down in seconds. We spun back and mopped up the infantry cohort.

"I'm out, metalheads," said Williams. Her suit was venting black fumes and staggering in midair.

"Copy. Get your ass down on the ground." We needed a battlefield perspective now. "Status report, Kim."

A brief pause followed as he plowed through the tactical. We reoriented, forming a tight circle facing outward. "Eight down, sir! Minimal casualties for our forces. Wait. Yes, four hit, two confirmed fatalities. The civilian situation is FUBAR. A bloodbath."

Dear God. "Update on that wormhole."

"Empty of hostiles. We got this under control."

"Negative, Sergeant! We gotta shut that door. Get Central Command on the line. We need the Daughter out here! She's the only one who has a chance of closing it."

"Wilco, Captain!"

"As long as the portal's open, *anything* could come through."

And something did.

The first sign we were in trouble was the screams over MECH-core transmissions. Five suits were flung over us.

"What the hell?"

Kim broke in. "Gamma-3 group, sir. They danced past us toward that hole during the battle. Life signs flatlined. They're all dead."

The fight had pushed us to the left of the platform, up against the city walls where we downed our triads. The surrounding

mayhem obscured the new events. I had a bad feeling about the situation.

"Alpha team—the spacetime countermeasures! Power them up now!"

It came, a cry over the COM, the chaos too wild to determine who. "False Dawn!"

"False Dawn, False Dawn!" Screams followed.

"The wormhole!" I shouted. "We're the only ones who can hope to engage!"

We fired our thrusters and blasted toward the spinning vortex.

And there she was.

A nightmare I could never have imagined. Standing at the base of the hell-tunnel was the small figure of a woman in a white robe. She glided forward, her arms upraised. Invisible forces slung MECHcore soldiers away from her like debris in a cyclone. The sand in front of her matted and compressed. Heat waves rose from the ground, reflective pools forming from glassified grains. Red hair fell from the sides of her bald and bulbous head. Her green eyes shone in my magnified view screen. It was Ambra Dawn.

And yet it was not.

Her gait spoke of a different personality. Facial features were similar but not identical to those of the Daughter. Her expression was vile, devoid of the depth and empathy I had come to associate with that face. Hideous cables and wires sprouted from regions of her skull. They embedded themselves at others—of medical or mechanical nature, I couldn't tell. A demon's fashioning of our savior, a fiend's torturing of an already tortured life.

I was going to destroy it.

"Semicircle around the thing!" I yelled, arming my final missiles. "Full tensor deflection on! Burn the batteries dead! We'll get one shot at her!"

My team responded. I detected the field activations. The warheads armed in other suits, and they struck the formation in

seconds. The countermeasures allowed us to resist the spacetime warping that had doomed the other MECHcore teams.

"Launch!" Ten birds blasted toward the creature, closing in at several times the speed of sound.

All for nothing. The projectiles veered away, flying into the scorching desert. Moments later, their explosions shook the air. But we didn't have time to contemplate events.

My suit exploded. The chassis ripped from my body like some discarded exoskeleton. I hurtled to the ground with a terrible impact and screamed as I felt my right leg snap. The bone tore through the muscle of my thigh, blood spurting down my shattered limb to soak the sands.

I don't know how much time passed. I couldn't move, the pain blinding me, distorting my senses. I was half naked, stunned, cut off from my team and all communication.

I failed to protect her.

A shadow dimmed the sun, and a figure stood over me. It was the demon girl. An impostor with red hair and green eyes, who dared violate the sacred image of the Daughter. I grabbed at the vile form to beat the false life out of it, but I couldn't lift my arms. A power paralyzed me.

She entered me.

Her thoughts were a knife carving through my skull. Blades sliced inward against my will. Pushing, tearing, groping their way into my consciousness. My life, my memories, my feelings, my dreams. She sampled them all, holding me in contempt at every moment. Vulnerable, broken, my mind lay supine. Her corrupt Reader organ dug deeper into my being than I had ever gone.

The hot probe paused. The mental drill boring through my soul ceased spinning. The False Dawn yanked some structure of my awareness, tugging with the tentacles of its thought.

Its eyes widened. The monster smiled, grinning down at me with a hideous glare. It cut my psyche like a razor.

I howled. I cried out as I never had from any pain, any injury I had suffered. A child trapped in a nightmare he couldn't escape. My tormented spirit screamed for salvation.

Answering my call, the universe *shifted*.

I don't know how to explain it. A seismic event in spacetime. Nothing eyes could see or hands touch. Known in some buried, primitive place. The air undulated. Time stopped and started, phenomena strobing without meaning. A deep, infrasonic throb shook the center of my consciousness.

The False Dawn leaped up. The agonizing probes vanished, its hellish mind removed from my own. My body convulsed. I couldn't help myself. I wept. Tears flowed from sobs in profound relief and personal devastation.

Greater events unfolded. The remaining Dram triads imploded, crushed into objects hardly larger than a suitcase. Unseen power slung them to the side. Their infantry collapsed. Bodies intact, their forms dropped to the ground as if they had suffered some terrible stroke.

The creature's smile was gone. It scanned the battlefield and focused past me to the Temple. As a weak, pathetic worm, I arched my neck to see as well.

The Daughter arrived. She floated like some goddess descended from the heavens. The rubber matrix of reality about her puckered and warped, strained to a breaking point. She glided toward her clone. Her eyes were green fire, visible through sharp slits and under slanted red brows.

The monster threw her hands forward. Ripples of distortion exploded from her. The attack pulverized unfortunate souls between them. Torn inside out, aged or returned to fetal forms of themselves, it was like some sort of spacetime bomb.

It hit a wall of nothing in front of Ambra Dawn. A barrier refracted the environment like spray from a hose impacting a crystal sphere. *Space* and *time* splattered, bounced, and danced in

multiple directions. Droplets of reality congealed in the air and floated. Events and places wobbled within them, winking out of existence in miniature vortexes. Rivers of the universe cascaded away from her. They ignored gravity, repelled by some incomprehensible force.

The False Dawn's jaw slackened. Her eyes widened and her arms fell to her sides.

The Daughter drew her hands together like someone raising a precious package. The cyborg horror howled. It was a hateful cry, a furious rejection. She was lifted off the ground, her limbs twitching, her eyes wild. Ripples formed around her and became ropes of transparent nothing. This visible nonexistence wrapped her in a cocoon of solid emptiness.

Ambra eased beside the thing. Her doppelgänger thrashed, trapped twenty feet above the desert floor, gawking at her mirror image. Ambra closed her eyes.

The False Dawn arched her back in midair. Her green eyes rolled back in her head, her muscles rigid like the onset of rigor mortis. Whatever was left of time stuttered, and her body jerked from stillness to convulsions.

Yet she remained trapped. The Daughter's eyes were squeezed shut, her face strained. I shuddered in recognition. She had entered her enemy's mind.

Ambra's eyes flew open, and from the corners of my vision, shapes shifted. *Shadows*. Forms indescribable. An essence burned the edges of reality around their outlines. A viscous smoke flowed out of the wormhole, extending black fingers to the False Dawn. They wrapped tendrils across the imprisoned creature.

The tentacles pulled the monstrosity back toward them, the portal narrowing. *They're trying to rescue her!* The Daughter watched their efforts in silence, hovering over the desert.

As the ghosts closed about the clone, Ambra shut her eyes again.

The effect was like nothing I had ever known. Everything before paled in comparison. The military engagement. The powers of these two Readers distorting reality.

From a center, near the shadowed entities, from a point of nothingness, a force radiated. The impulse impacted me like an explosion, as well as a hallucinogen. Time and space, *meaning itself,* dissolved. The Daughter obliterated causality. I cannot explain any better. I have no words for it.

The creatures melted, blended, and like some chaotic ink, bled back into the tunnel. They screamed, but their screams did not take place in the medium of sound. I didn't know what I was experiencing.

Ambra flew forward. Her hand plunged through the distorted rubber prison around the False Dawn. She touched the creature's forehead with the flat of her palm, and the woman's head whipped backward. The clone floated limp in the cocoon. Blood dripped from the insertion points of some of the larger cables in her skull. Ambra waved both hands toward the woman, and the mimic catapulted into the tunnel. The enemy disappeared from sight.

She glared at the hole in space and scowled. Closing her fists, she slammed the portal shut. A stunning blast of sand erupted and rained about us.

A terrible silence fell. I had not recognized the churning noise until it ended. In this relative quiet, moans and cries drifted from the wounded.

She turned to me and glided beside my form, her feet lowering and resting on the ground by my chest. I could see tears in her eyes as she knelt and stroked my forehead.

"I'm so sorry, Nitin. Rest. It will be okay." Her voice was the most beautiful music I'd ever heard.

An enveloping warmth flooded through me, a profound sense of safety and belonging. And fatigue. Deep exhaustion. I couldn't keep my eyes open, and I lost consciousness.

Chapter 15

What you see and what you look at are two different things.

Ernest Hemingway

The walls of the tunnel extended without end.

Rough forces dragged me through its fire. Backward and forward, like some piston in an ancient combustion engine. I lost direction, orientation. Stars surrounded, peered with a cold intensity through the distorting tube. Silent. Still. Dispassionate.

I couldn't speak. I couldn't scream. I had no voice, no body. Back and forth. Stellar radiance blurred in acceleration and glared empty during lifetimes of stillness.

What am I?

Through the endless eon, I discovered polarity. Some order to space. Opposite charges, feelings, purposes. *Beings*. At one end, light and warmth. A terrible, wonderful love I could hardly encounter without being reborn in it. At the other, antagonism. Darkness. Anger burning to unmake. *Antipathy.*

From both ends, green eyes stared back at me through this infinite continuum. Green eyes in icy blackness. Laughing. Green eyes in sunlight. Weeping. Calling my name.

Nitin. Come to me.

Ambra, how? I can't. I can't move. Help!

Then I'll come to you, my heart.

Green and blue.

The green swayed in the blue, golden crowns dancing at the tops of towers. My eyelids twitched and shut in the bright light. Giants stomped on my shoulders, crushing my form into a clay mold.

Soil.

My hands opened and closed, my fingers scratching through dirt. The pillars unblurred.

Corn.

Energy coursed through me.

I know this place.

Weakness numbed. Pain paralyzed. I summoned a scream, but no sound escaped as I stretched myself to a sit. The middle of a giant cornfield greeted my eyes. My body was naked. My mind muddled, sloppy. I trembled with fear. Afraid of this strangeness, this vulnerability. Terrified for my sanity.

Ambra is here.

I stumbled to a stand. Legs olive stems bending in the breeze. Knees battering one another. Panting, I unbent my back, straightened to the clear sky. Quivers danced through me.

Wasn't I just here? In some recent dream. *What is real?*

I remembered the way. Limping forward, lethargic, I shook my head. *Faster*. I pushed. One foot, the next. Plop into the wet mud. *Again*. Walking. Straining. Pacing. Racing. I dashed through

the maze of cornstalks. My heart thundered. Hope was adrenaline firing through my limbs.

I crashed from the corn and tripped to a grassy lawn. A farmhouse loomed before me. A figure stood in front of it.

"Nitin."

Her voice traveled undiminished across the yard.

My vision blurred from tears. Horror lodged like a tumor in my brain, threatening to grow and consume my identity. Repulsive digits ransacked my cells. I was broken. Lost.

Here is my haven.

A woman not twenty broke the blackness veiling my eyes. The image of the Daughter I had known and gazed on my entire life. Moon-milk white. Flamed in fire. Lucent with emeralds. Light whirling about her.

Yet different. Alive in a way I could never feel from holos. Transcendent in a tone this dream alone dared devise. Centered in a universe with no distractions. Without worries. Revolving around us.

"Ambra?"

She too stood naked. My eyes darted across the lines and curves of her body. Desire pumped through me. Awe at the depth of her beauty.

She approached. "Do you know where we are?"

I blinked. "No. A farm?"

"*My farm*, Nitin," she said, taking my arm in hers, her teeth bright beneath her shining eyes.

She tugged me, ushering toward the house. "I was born here. Spent eleven years under this roof." Her voice lilted and sung, reciting a magical tale. "You burst from our cornfields. They go on until it seems like the world will end before you get out of them. My father labored out there. The big companies always wanted to swallow us up. He was determined to stay independent. He hated them and how they killed the plains."

She stopped halfway across the backyard. Her arm painted the open expanse of land extending from their property.

"Isn't it beautiful?"

The terrain continued further than my eyes could focus. Flat but for a slope enhancing the view from our position. Browns and greens and houses dotted the endless plain. The cyan sky faded at the horizon. There, grayed and blackened, it crashed into a bubbling mountain range of clouds. Lightning flashed within them a million miles away.

"A storm is coming," I said.

"Many," said Ambra. Her smile was gone. "But they aren't here yet. We have a short time."

"Please don't go away."

I remembered the other dream. *Memories of dreams in a dream.* I tried to suppress tears, but so much emotion flowed over me I was overcome. The wild creativity of fantasy released my imagination. I babbled as ideas rushed through my mind.

"Let me rest here. With you. I can't take the hole anymore. It's eating me. My whole life. No one understands. I can't face the hurricane of emptiness." I trailed off, a nightmare lurking behind my conscious thoughts. A monster hunting and haunting, intangible, as real as myself. I pushed it away.

"I understand," she said, placing her hand on my face.

"Here," I pleaded, "it's safe with you. It's right. Please, can we stay?"

She shook her head, her voice low. "I'm sorry, Nitin. We can't."

"So, I'm dreaming. This is all a lie?"

"Dreams are not lies. Dreams are other spaces. Other times. Realities inside larger places. Bubbles within seas. Sometimes a person can remain in the bubble and ride out the storms. Never leave the dream."

I turned back to the dark clouds, no closer yet no less threatening. “But we can’t.”

“No, we can’t. And it’s my fault.” She sighed.

A tan-and-white streak sped around the corner of the house. Before I could process, she released my arm, and the blur leaped into the air. She embraced an enormous pile of hair. I recognized it as some sort of sheepdog.

The animal licked her face and trembled with excitement. Its fur was copious, thick and silky, giving the dog an appearance of being overweight.

Ambra laughed as she cuddled the pet. “This is Matt, Nitin.” She turned the fluff toward me.

Dogs do not have the popularity in India they do in Western nations. My experience was more with street strays than manicured breeds. They were usually diseased beggars or aggressive biters. Hesitant, I reached out my hand.

“Turn your palm down and bring it below his nose.”

I did so, and it sniffed me. Satisfied, but not taken with me, he returned his attention to Ambra.

“I saw him die, you know,” she said. “First in a vision. It was horrible.” Her face clouded as she squeezed the animal a little too tightly, and the dog twitched its paws. “I couldn’t stop it. I didn’t even know what it was at that age. Later, even when I understood my powers, I had to let Earth die.”

“You did it to save so much more. So many worlds! In the end, you brought us back!”

“Success doesn’t change the choice. Or the damage of making it.”

“Don’t blame yourself.”

She shook her head. “If you could only see. I am a frightening nexus of cause and effect. It was my fault my parents died. Servants of the Dram killed them, butchered them to get to me. My responsibility an entire planet full of life boiled. And it’s my doing

we can't stay here." She touched my cheek again and smiled. "Where it's safe."

I reached out and held her hand, the porcelain hue like a beam of light in my palm. "It's okay. I knew we couldn't. I felt it. I can't explain how much I need you."

She searched my face. "You're the handsomest man I'll ever not see." I blushed as she laughed. "Do you know what I feel most being close to you? Warmth and *smell*. You know I can see in my weird way. I can see your features. I've *seen* them in ways you don't even know. And you *are* handsome to me, Nitin. I've had crushes and infatuations, but the first time I saw you—the many times I've watched you—always such power! It's underneath conscious thought. But I do not see you with my true eyes. All those pathways in my brain atrophied centuries ago. All to the service of my tumor."

"You speak like it's evil."

"It is."

"It's what has saved us!"

"And killed billions." She gazed over the plains toward the storm. The dog jumped down. Nose to the ground, it began an indecipherable olfactory quest across the grass. "You grew up with the powers of this thing in my skull as a force for liberation. Living with it, what it has done to me and others, what it will do—nothing is ever as it seems."

It was unsettling to hear her pain. Wrecking to see the lines on her face. The tension in her muscles. The sad hollowness in her unseeing eyes. History lessons lie sterile on the page. Imagining the torments of another's life is an important exercise, but so limited. A five-minute conversation in the middle of a dream conveyed infinitely more.

"I want to understand, Ambra. I want to know everything about you."

"I know you do. You will, beyond what you have imagined. A

few steps at a time. That's how we climb to the Temple. Hand in hand."

She inhaled from her stomach, closing her eyes. "*Smell*. Waythrel said something about immune receptors and genetics and mate selection. It's all a blur. Biology. Isn't it strange how so much of what we are and know and feel are chemicals and cells?"

"We are what we are."

"Yes. Even the Readers don't know what that is."

She sniffed again, dipping her head close to my neck. Her breath sent shudders through me. "I could eat you up!" She paused as my body tensed, a bow ready to fire.

"Walk with me, Nitin," she sighed, pulling back. "Away from the storm. Or I'll want to entangle us right here and now. But it's the wrong time. The wrong place."

My throat was dry, and my hairs stood on end. I felt things stirring below, embarrassment again coloring my cheeks. She pulled me toward the side of the house. The growing thunderheads moved to our backs, and we faced a bright sun halfway to noon.

"It *is* beautiful," I managed.

I had never seen America's Great Plains. I had imagined that the sameness, the flatness, the agricultural devotion of the land would be monotonous. Boring. In a way, it was, until you drank in the enormity of it. The fields were a sea of different colored crops cresting here and there. Houses like small boats drifted across the waves. The storm was majestic in an awful kind of way as it poured forward like lava from a volcano.

"This is what imprinted me," she said. "Shaped and programmed the impressionable mind of a little girl. I guess I was born to see into distances. I can never go back to this place, as much for where I must go as for what terrible things happened here."

The land she loved, and yet a soil stained with the blood of her

parents. Why were we here? Where was she going that she couldn't stay?

We came because you approach my heart, its light and darkness. We arrived in your search to return from the unlight of the clone monster. We swim in these currents because existence is layer upon layer of dream within dream.

At the mention of the False Dawn, a nightmare threatened to rage into my consciousness. I shivered, and she clasped my hand.

"There, Nitin! So much glory!"

She waved her hand over the fields. The air shimmered and swayed, and a passage opened. In the middle of the bright daylight, a necklace of gemstone stars exploded.

She pulled me forward into the breached space. We stepped through the day on Earth onto the sands of an alien beach. Strange seas crashed at my toes. Above was a churning miracle of radiance—an entire galaxy painted across the night sky.

Ambra slid her naked form against me and pressed her lips to mine, her eyes capturing my gaze. She placed a hand on my chest, near my heart. My breathing deepened and quickened. She whispered into my ear.

"I'm with you, Nitin. Always. Never forget. Follow my voice as you did to get here. You will find your way home."

"Is this home?" I wondered.

"One of many," she said, smiling. "A place to visit in another dream. Here we'll love each other on these sands."

Chapter 16

There is always some madness in love.
But there is also always some reason in madness.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Once again, I woke from trauma in a hospital bed, staring up into the forest of eyestalks of a Xixian medic.

Where was this? Where had I been? What day I had woken into? The room was strange. I didn't know it. I did not recognize the Xix. I was thankful I could recall my own name.

A tunnel.

The long horror floated through my awareness. Endless anguish.

Worm triads in the Thar. Japanese nurses.

No, that was before.

The Sahara. A new team. *Yes!* A unique mission to salvage the war.

A wormhole.

I shuddered and closed my eyes. It came back. Hell wrapped her fiery fingers around my throat. The monster scarred my mind, her thought tendrils probing sensitive tissues. Ruining me. Sullying my soul. I was unclean. *Used.*

A warm sensation pressed against my hand. I turned my sore neck, my eyelids blinking, staring into green, blind eyes once again.

Not the clone. Eyes that embraced and did not wound.

"It's okay," she said. "Don't think of her." Her hand squeezed mine.

"Daughter of Time." I didn't know what else to say. Echoes of a dream washed over me. *Did it happen? Is this real?*

"I am more than that to you, my Nitin." She smiled. It was soft and lined with sorrow. I had never felt so much love poured toward me. "Say my name."

I choked out the word, hardly suppressing the tears. "Ambra."

I was in no state to analyze what was happening, what had happened. There could be no sequence of events I could concoct leading to this moment. Nothing I could conjure in my imagination that would place the Daughter at my bedside. Holding my hand. Speaking impossible words.

"My heart," she said, her face radiant.

You don't have to understand, Nitin. Her voice in my mind again. *Accept what you know is true. There will be a time to talk more.*

"Yes. Please." I closed my eyes as emotion overcame me. I couldn't process my experiences. Other memories flooded back. "What happened? My team?"

A familiar tone. "They are recovering nearby."

Waythrel. I shifted my gaze to the looming bulk of the extraterrestrial.

"Most of the injuries were moderate, like your leg," it said.

Moderate? I studied my wounded thigh. Little evidence

remained of damage. A hairline scar peaked from where the bone had torn through.

"Which aren't moderate?"

"Medical Sergeant Ryan Marshall died before we could reach him. He spent his last moments tending to the others. He saved many lives." The alien gave him a moment of silence. "The rest of your team has returned to the barracks. They recommenced training yesterday."

"Wait. Why am I still here?"

The medic cut in. "Because your injuries were more severe."

I glanced down at my leg, but it corrected me.

"Not to your body. To your psyche."

Ambra reached over and brushed her fingers against my forehead. "She did terrible things to you, Nitin." Her face constricted. "An act of violence and power as unnecessary as it was cruel."

The alien doctor explained. "The mind, or rather the neurological support framework giving birth to the epiphenomenon, is fragile, Captain Ratava. We had to move quickly, or much of the damage would have become permanent."

"Damage."

"Psychological trauma, and through it, physical wounds," said Waythrel. "The matter of the brain and its associated consciousness are like a particle and a wave in quantum theory. Two aspects of a greater whole. Injury to one impacts the other. We made repairs at the level of biology. For the sentience field that is your mind, we needed a different kind of doctor."

"Ambra." I turned back and drank her gaze. Green jewels spilling water.

"She did not leave your side for seven days."

Her fingers wiped away tears. "Until I knew I could do no more."

A week? I wasn't sure how to believe it. The Daughter had devoted herself to my sickbed even as the war effort collapsed. And

how to accept that my proper recovery demanded such an investment?

I shuddered. "I still feel that thing in my head."

"Even with her ministrations, it was impossible you would suffer no lasting effects from a mind probe of this nature," said the medic. "We can assure you that your cognitive functions are unharmed. Psychologically, there will be residual pain."

I turned to Ambra. "Thank you." I spoke to the others as well. "I'm grateful to you all."

I couldn't convey the gratitude at having the horrible invader erased, even incompletely. Otherwise, I'd have gone mad.

Fatigue crept over me, but questions bubbled through my consciousness.

"I saw…*shadows.* Like in the reports. Were they real?"

"Yes," Waythrel confirmed.

"What are they?"

"Nothing like we have encountered in this galaxy. By showing themselves here, they have revealed much to us. Some equipment survived the battle. Together with the Daughter's observations, they have provided critical information. Enough for us to begin assembling a model for what we are dealing with."

"Why did they come?" I asked.

"We don't think they meant to," said Ambra. "They were overconfident in their red-headed Frankenstein. The clone wasn't supposed to fail so completely."

"At the least, they probably assumed their Reader could retreat and return," said the Xix. "When it was clear she could not escape from the Daughter, they intervened."

"So, they were close. Waiting."

"Yes. Hiding in the corners of spacetime. Whatever they are, they have extremely advanced technology. Not developed enough to control a wormhole—they still needed their engineered copy.

However, they can exploit the manipulations of the continuum, cache unseen within the folds of reality."

"You defeated them," I said, a note of pride I didn't intend to voice.

She pressed my hand again. "They aren't supernatural, Nitin. They're made of matter, like everything else."

"With one exception," finished Waythrel.

An exception to material existence? "What do you mean?"

"They are creatures wholly composed of antimatter."

"Antimatter?" Had I misheard? "Wouldn't they explode or something in our atmosphere?"

"We are unsure how they manage to shield themselves, but they expend enormous energy to do so," said the Xix. "Since they are very much natural entities, the Daughter was able to deal with them."

"Then we have a chance," I said, finding myself slipping into sleep. "The mission. There's hope."

"Yes," said Ambra, smiling. "We can talk more when you're stronger."

She bent over and kissed my cheek, whispering in my ear. Her breath was warm and raised bumps over my body. "Soon, we'll walk among the stars, Nitin Ratava. For a time, you will experience how beautiful they are."

Her words whirled like poetry, haunting, comforting. I sank into the bed, spinning toward a deep slumber.

Chapter 17

Jealousy does not wait for reasons.

Gandhi

The clinic staff had turned in for the evening. I lay alone with flashing monitors and a night-shift nurse at her station in the hallway. Tomorrow, they'd release me. I'd rejoin my team. We were to meet with Ambra and her advisors to finalize the mission plans.

Days of intensive rehab proved Xixian medicine was miraculous. My shattered leg was like new. My physical conditioning, optimal. Short drills in my suit showed little degradation in performance. Attention-deficit red flags remained. It would take a lot more time to smooth out the mental damage the monster had inflicted on my psyche.

I didn't notice the effects during my daily activities. Nights were another story. I dreaded them and began to fear my own

dreams. I needed to get this thing out of my head. The sleep deprivation alone was going to end up making me dysfunctional.

He came during this last evening in the hospital, after midnight on a full moon. A silver light mingled with the LEDs of the medical equipment. I wasn't sleeping. Another nightmare had startled me awake. I was wiping the sweat from my forehead when I heard footsteps in the corridor outside my room. Not the soft padding of the night nurse, but a heavier, more assertive gait.

I propped myself up on the bed and listened. Oddly, I welcomed this unsettling visitor. It gave me something concrete to consider. Far preferable to the ghostly remnants of a mental assault.

The steps stopped beside my door. A tone sounded, indicating an activation of the external touchpad. The door dissolved as a male figure stepped into the room.

"I understand that you sleep poorly at night."

It was Sepehr Mazandarani, the counselor to Ambra Dawn. In this moonlit dark, his devilish features were exaggerated, caricatured. It was with some apprehension that I watched him pull a chair over to my bedside.

"News travels," I said, a sense of threat palpable from this man.

He smirked, waving away my comment. "I am the Daughter's closest advisor. *Human*, anyway. Her thoughts are rarely hidden from me."

"Are you a Reader? Do you commune with her?"

His face tightened. "No. She employs me for other talents that I can offer."

He enjoyed my discomfort.

"What might those be?"

Again, the grin. "Analysis. Logic. Strategy. She relies heavily on my counsel."

"Yes, you're an important man."

He cocked his head to the side and laughed. “I did not come here to monkey dance with you, Ratava.”

“Good. Why are you here, then?”

His eyes narrowed, his upper lip curling. “I don’t dance, Captain. I act when I have the information to do so. Right now, I don’t have such data, except for circumstantial evidence. It has me concerned greatly for the safety and well-being of the Daughter.”

I pushed myself upright. “What do you mean?”

“In your desert heroics at the Rebirth, you were present at an event that has never occurred. *Never* has there been an attack at the Temple. Not in two hundred years.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Furthermore,” he continued, cutting me off, “in order for the clone and its allies to have breached the Xixian defense fields, they would have needed help. From *inside*. Our security systems scramble the four-space position of the Six Cities. No Reader can locate us within a parsec or millennium. Opening a wormhole at the perfect location and moment to attempt an assassination? Well, this requires a device, a beacon of some sort. The homing signal must broadcast from here.”

“What are you saying?”

He locked eyes with me. “We have a traitor in our midst, Captain.”

In the Temple? It was impossible. I had seen the devotion of the people here. I couldn’t imagine any of them aiding our enemies. The foes not just of Ambra Dawn but of the entire human species. The terrorist groups might hate the Daughter, but they hated the aliens more. Besides, how could they get a spy past her? She could read minds. She could predict the future!

“What do the Xix say? What does Waythrel say?”

“It was *their* hypothesis. They know the nature of the defenses they have established. Protections they are now modifying to prevent a repeat event.”

"Who would do such a thing?"

"We don't know. But I will tell you, Captain—I am going to find out." His face boiled, an anger bubbling beneath.

My thoughts churned. Something was wrong. His presence, his delivery of sensitive information like this, made little sense.

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"The Daughter has developed a particular empathy toward you. At best, I hope to persuade you to take this threat seriously and to do all you can to protect her."

"At worst?"

He stood and grasped the neckline of his black robes, sneering at me like he might a desert roach. "I don't like anomalies, Captain Ratava. Unexplainable events or people. Your resume as it concerns Ambra Dawn is strange beyond explanation. You have single-mindedly aimed your career trajectory like a missile. All to place yourself precisely in this location. At this time. You offer unconditional emotion to her, immediately winning her attention and confidence. Following your arrival, after centuries of peace, our defenses are breached from within and the Daughter attacked."

Warmth drained from my body. "You can't be serious."

"Circumstantial evidence, Captain. But rest assured, if it ever becomes more, I will be the first one with a gun to your head."

He spun on his heels and marched out of the room.

Chapter 18

If we have learned one thing from the history of invention and discovery, it is that, in the long run—and often in the short one—the most daring prophecies seem laughably conservative.

Arthur C. Clarke

A suspicious Mazandarani escorted us across the Temple City. The Dish loomed above, its height impossible to grasp. Our route entered within the ten-kilometer radius of the supporting structures.

We passed massive columns of alien metal that plunged into the sand. The base supports themselves were as broad as buildings. Webbed shadows of the architecture littered our path in the setting sun.

We halted at the entrance to a beautiful building, a well-realized blend of human and Xixian tastes. The construction rose seven or eight stories, resembling a strange plant or deep-sea organism. The largest expanse was at the top, a toroidal curvilinear solid. It seemed to float above the desert, supported in reality by tapering

columns. These six pillars morphed to ellipsoids at their apex. The torus rested on the smaller objects that flowed into the ground. The material mimicked the indestructible concrete in the buildings of the surrounding cities. The tan color blended into the sands.

The walls appeared porous in places. Complex, flower-like geometrical patterns scampered across the surfaces of the bulbous toroid. Our local star dipped below the horizon and a radiance flooded from those thinner regions of the structure. It suggested an enormous Japanese lantern crossed with a bioluminescent jellyfish from the depths.

The Temple.

There had never been a holo to emerge from the Sahara. Here, the Daughter met with some of New Earth's most farsighted Readers. Joining them were many from different alien species. Together, they entered into a group trance, their minds connecting in the medium of space and time. Many claimed they formed a community consciousness greater than the sum of its individuals. This mind had once traveled back in time and unmade history. I neared the epicenter of our power in the galaxy.

We climbed thirty broad steps below the entrance, passing beneath an expansive arch. Carved into its surface were symbols of both extraterrestrial and human origin. The doorway opened to a cavernous chamber. The curved walls within were far larger than they were from the outside. Smaller patterns on the external face took on exaggerated dimensions inside.

What stole my eye was the source of the glow seeping through the etched motifs. In the middle of this vast space, undulated a brightness I compare to a plasma. A superheated state of matter, with colors flowing and merging in constant motion.

Its iridescent shape was hard to fathom. From a distance, with a brief glance, I assumed it was spherical. The longer I gazed, the closer I approached, I caught hints of an irregular geometry. Its

configuration altered with each heartbeat. I glimpsed pieces, projections, sides of the full entity. They phased in and out of perception. It was dizzying.

Centered in this terrible and unearthly energy was a dais. It had the dimensions of a small table, obsidian. It connected to the pulsing chromatic field through numerous extensions. Many appeared alive, like slick tree roots.

I identified the structure from legend—the Xixian-designed seat of power for Ambra Dawn. Where she linked to the devices amplifying her modulations of the spacetime matrix. Placed radially around this central point were several hundred depressions. These were additional seats built into the Temple floor for the Reader cohort.

Despite the presence of such a potent energy source, I felt nothing. No disorienting sickness mirroring that in the battle between the Daughter and the False Dawn. No sense of electricity or heat. The air was still except near the entrance where the Saharan winds approached and died. I didn't see a grain of sand anywhere in the chamber.

"They sure don't go halfway," said Moore. He and the other members of the team gawked at the vision before them.

"There's some kind of geometrical distortion here," said Fox. "Spacetime funkiness. It's bigger inside than out."

"Yeah, noticed that," said Williams. "What do you suppose the glowing glob is in the middle?"

A voice answered from in front of us. "A doorway to the Orb."

Stepping out of fog and darkness, the Daughter appeared. Waythrel and Major Mizoguchi flanked her. The three approached as Mazandarani left our side and took a place beside the older soldier.

"The Orb?" asked Kim. "How is that possible? We're on New Earth."

"The geometry of time and space is not intuitive, Sergeant," said the Xix. "We could give you more detailed explanations, but we are here to discuss more pressing matters."

"Why in here?" I asked.

Ambra smiled. "It will become clear soon. Please, take a seat."

She gestured at the floor in front of her and rested crossed-legged. Her motions were fluid, the dark robes flowing over her like water. The advisors, including the alien, also lowered themselves. I glanced at my team and shrugged. We sat.

"With their victories, our enemies grow more bold," said Mizoguchi. "We hope the compete destruction of their recent attack force will slow them. Provide us the opportunity to develop our countermeasures."

"In addition, Ambra has sent them a message," said Waythrel. "She cast back at them the dead body of the clone prior to closing the wormhole."

"Yes," I said remembering. "What did you do to her?"

Ambra's shoulders slumped. She winced. "I examined her consciousness, to understand what she was, what had motivated her. So much darkness. The Dram have programmed their clones with extreme hatred toward us. Little hope to reach out to that pitiable thing." She shook her head. "No saving her, no chance to keep her prisoner. I couldn't let her return. So, I wiped her mind."

Moore leaned forward, his long legs splayed in his seated position. "You did what?"

Ambra sighed. "A telepathic overload. A destruction of her mental spacetime matrix that scrambles all coherence."

"The biological portion of her awareness, her brain, was reduced to pulp," said Mazandarani. "You can think of it as *frying* her neurons."

"What this means," said Waythrel, "is that our enemies will learn nothing from her. Nothing from their attack except that we

hold a power they do not yet know how to counter. A cohort of their new allies was destroyed."

Mizoguchi focused on the coming task. "Because of these recent attacks, we have decided to accelerate the covert operation. You will be leaving shortly for your first target node."

"Today?" I'd just stepped out of the hospital.

"Whoa, wait a minute. Time out," said Kim. "What about recon? Mission prep? Stuff we like to do to stay alive."

Williams cut in. "We're not just going to jump to some random system without knowing anything about it."

The major answered. "Of course not. Do not insult me with such a concern."

"Then what?" Kim asked.

Mizoguchi bowed toward the Daughter, and Ambra picked up the discussion.

"If you are willing, you can learn everything about the locations in the next few minutes. We can save days of briefings and holocrystals."

"How might we do that?" asked Moore.

"By opening your mind to me. With your permission, I can share the information telepathically. No need for slower and more cumbersome methods."

The Brit recoiled. "Hold it right there, princess. No one's crawling inside my noggin—you understand?"

"Sergeant—" I began.

"Sorry, sir, but no fucking way."

Mazandarani scowled at Moore. "There is nothing to fear unless you have something to hide."

"Yeah, I got a lot of things to hide," said Moore, leaning back and smirking at the counselor. "Like what me and the mechanic girl were doing under the engine hoist the other night. Or what I think of that minger growing on your chin."

"The Daughter is discreet," said Waythrel. "Such sharing is a

daily experience with the Xix. It unifies us, eases misunderstandings, and grants us an efficiency and group memory we would not otherwise possess. She has now brought this gift to your species. Already, the Readers of New Earth are united in this way. Especially those who have taken part in the sharings here at the Temple."

"It sounds amazing," said Fox.

"What do you mean, discreet?" Williams asked.

Ambra spoke. "She means I'm careful to touch only those aspects of your consciousness I'm required to. I won't pry into your thoughts or memories. I'll learn from you only what you want to share with me. Since none of you are Readers, you can't, through me, invade one another's minds. Only I can reach out to each of you."

My pulse raced. I couldn't believe the privilege she offered. While I could understand the concerns of Moore and Williams, my heart responded like Fox's. I desired nothing more than to have her mind connect with mine. I dared not speak of it. I feared my eagerness would spook the members of my team.

Kim raised his hand. "You said we could show what we wanted. What do you mean? Are we going to hear your voice in our heads and point thoughts at it? See your face? Exactly what the hell's going to happen?"

Ambra smiled. "It's a different experience for every person. Not one that has simple physical correlates like those you mention."

"I can answer this," said Mazandarani, still keeping an eye on the hulking soldier. "I'm not a Reader, but I have shared like this many times with the Daughter. It is a sense of another's personality—their soul, for lack of a better word. An understanding of their nature not bound to their appearance or voice or words. The Daughter's spirit will envelope you. You won't have to do all the

work of getting to know her. It will simply be there, filling your awareness."

"By the Dawn," said Fox.

Moore scowled. "Well, what if I don't want to get to know you that badly?"

"I accept your choices," she said. "I respect any of you who refuse."

"Then what? We're out?"

"No," she answered. "The others can brief you en route and at the site. Only they'll know far more, and you'll be playing catch-up."

He didn't hesitate. "Count me the hell out, then." He leaned back on his elbows.

"Williams?" I asked.

Her frown showed she wasn't too keen on the idea, either. My warrant officer stared straight at Ambra for half a minute. I didn't know what her internal battle was, but in the end, she accepted the sharing. "I calculate the gains outweigh the losses."

Mazandarani spoke. "Am I to assume the rest of you are in favor? Except for the sergeant, of course."

We agreed.

Moore rose. "So, what, I go wait outside or something?"

"Not necessary," said Ambra. "Please don't disturb us until we wake."

"Wake?" asked Kim.

"From the trance," said the Iranian. "You don't think the Daughter will enter your mind and download a week's worth of material and you'll continue to chat?"

They contemplated this in silence.

Waythrel guided us. "Try to calm your feelings. It usually helps for humans to close their eyes."

I closed my eyes. I tried to relax by imagining the surrounding environment. My thoughts moved to the rip in space that had

embedded a segment of the Orb in this chamber. The spinning colors in their bizarre paths hypnotized me.

For a few minutes, I heard nothing but the soft breathing of those near me. The faint, dying howls of the winds outside accompanied them. The haunting cries of a tortured land.

The room grew quieter. I felt the rhythm of my heartbeat, the blood throbbing in my ears. The pounding intensified. The beats assumed shapes. Forms of the cardiac muscle. Vessels straining under pressure. Corpuscles coursing in spurts through my body. Blue to red. Lung to heart. Webs of alveoli opening, ballooning.

Cells adopted the patterns of vast continents stretching to the horizon. All embedded in the pulse and pound. Each oscillation brought a wave of gray particles. Molecules of oxygen trapped and fed to contorted monsters, bands of chained atoms with a central core not unlike the dais of Ambra Dawn.

Inward I sank. Past protein to amino acids, carbon bonds. Electrons danced about me, nebulous, unreal and alive. Crossing thousands of times the distance before I floated to a glowing center like the heart of a star. The nucleus exploded to reveal quarks and strings and elements I had no words for. They whirled through me in confusing motions.

Whiplash—everything reversed. The bizarre building blocks took on the shapes of atoms. Simple structures of the simplest element—hydrogen. At speeds never experienced, I raced from this microscopic labyrinth into the depths of space.

A nebula. Nearby, a celestial cluster painted the gas cloud in a shimmering spectrum. A band of diamonds coated the heavens opposite me. Thousands of stars.

An ocean world, blue and reflective in the blackness of the void. It spun about a star.

Between them, the dancing colors I had seen in the Temple in their full context—the Orb.

Chapter 19

The more you see how strangely Nature behaves, the harder it is to make a model that explains how even the simplest phenomena actually work. One does not, by knowing all the physical laws as we know them today, immediately obtain an understanding of anything much.

Richard Feynman

Three star systems, their planets, the location of the Orb in each system. I lived multiple lives in those distant spaces. Ages flowed through me, images and cultures and locales. It was like no learning experience I had ever known.

I sat passive in the beginning. I let the Daughter do whatever it was she had to do to plant this information in my mind. The flood of knowledge was consuming. An avalanche of places and times and events. Entire histories of other species and their planets. Somehow, it was all hers to share, as if she had spent eons across every point in space. Her vision was with a god's eyes. So much poured through me, it bordered on surreal. I can't explain how the

process translated into operational facts. I wasn't conscious of any learning, solely endless experience.

Later, woken from the trance, I retained the data on the targets to complete our mission. More than I needed. I had become a citizen of each world, a historian and anthropologist. An organic library.

By the lesson of the last system, the third String projection, the journey was familiar. The brain is an adaptation machine. Already mine was finding an equilibrium with the incredible. I turned restless. Searching. Reaching out into the blackness for her.

Nitin.

She whispered my name. The warmth and love I'd sensed in the hospital bed tended me. A thousandfold stronger.

Follow my voice. Come to me.

An Orb.

All space fell to black, the star systems gone, the background of the galaxy missing. The information flow arrested.

Remaining was the mystical sphere. It grew, or I approached it at reckless speed. I couldn't tell which. Without any reference points, size and motion were relative.

Patterns, colors, *passages* rippled across the enormous surface. Not a surface! A reflective ocean skin, an illusion blanketing fathoms of mystery.

The power of the thing. A terrible, monstrous depth and abstraction froze my heart. Cold, dark, like the bottom of the deepest chasm in the sea.

Yet warmth. At the same time, in the midst of the alien and transcendent, empathy emanated. A vibrational resonance connecting me and the Orb. Pure. Guileless. Limitless *affection*.

The object spanned the width of my peripheral vision. The multidimensional corridors frothed beneath the churning waves, transforming into enormous rivers. I was a dust mote beside an ocean.

Nitin, come.

She called from within the god-sphere. Her psyche resonated in my body, a forgotten flesh tranced in the Saharan Temple. I hesitated—a heartbeat staring at the anomaly—and I steeled my courage, willing myself to her.

Acceleration wrenched my awareness forward. A madness of dimensional mazes darted past me. Her presence turned pervasive. The Orb merged with her.

No. Screams. Panicked cries. *Not my voice.* Yanked. Slung, hurled back and forth. *Lights in an endless tunnel.*

My dream? The nightmare nontube bent and twisted. Hyperspace knots burned the fabric of space. The stars assumed hideous rainbows of distorted color.

Cold hands. Cruel fingers. Pulling, tearing at me. Control, breaking my form, remaking it, demanding pounds of my flesh.

Excruciated. Formless, I felt my teeth grind. My nonbody spasm. My unback arch. The substanceless skin over my ghost frame stretching, ripping from a merciless strain.

I screamed. I wailed down this Orb funnel of hell where time spiraled and spun and completed a spiral to re-unbecome.

Full circle in multiple dimensions. I crashed howling face-first into the onrushing madness of my own torment.

Chapter 20

My heart, the bird of the wilderness, has found its sky in your eyes.

The Gardener by Rabindranath Tagore

Waves.

Waves crashing. Foam frothing through my consciousness. Sea and wind. Water wrung over rock. A breeze brushing my face. *Warmth.*

"Nitin, wake up."

I opened my eyes to green. A viridescent evening glow of alien vegetation. A forest of bizarre trees climbed around me. Their fluorescence glinted off the ocean.

And the emeralds of her eyes.

I lay on my back, coarse grains underneath. The heavens exploded in shape-shifting majesty. Auroras shimmied through the atmosphere as mad dancers. Behind them, a roiling vortex of light. A riot of stars. An entire spiral galaxy splayed out across the night sky. Distant suns winked in hues of gold, crimson, and purple. Fine gemstones.

Like the two jade jewels embracing me with their glance.

Ambra stared into my eyes. Her knees pressed into the sand beside me, water lapping the black robes trailing her. Her hands held mine over my chest.

"My Nitin." She smiled.

For some time, I could not respond. Could not move. The shock of my experiences, the devastating beauty of the planet, they overwhelmed my mind. Her form alongside my own—I was powerless. Once again unmade by her.

She reached one hand behind my neck and pulled. It seemed I weighed tons. My body was sore, every muscle and joint. I grunted, gasping as she helped me rise. One arm hung around my shoulders, the other held my hand.

"It will pass."

"Where are we? Where's the Temple?" I gazed at her face. "What happened to me?"

"Too many things that shouldn't have," she said. "The Temple is where and when we left it. We'll return to rejoin the others soon."

I gasped through the pain. "Was the journey so difficult for you?" She seemed unharmed.

Ambra shook her head. "No. It shouldn't have been for you. Travel through the Orbs can be disorienting, especially the first time. It isn't painful." She sighed. "Unless there's interference."

"How can that be?"

"I am no longer the only one who manipulates spacetime in our galaxy."

"The False Dawns."

"Their numbers grow, and so does the recklessness of their attacks."

"They produce them so quickly? Don't they have to be raised like a normal person?"

"Yes, but not all in one era. Our enemies have been patient.

They *will* be patient. Their successors have sent back an army to destroy us in our time."

"An *army?* How many?"

She shrugged. "They can hide much from me now. I see the warped edges where they have vandalized the Mind."

"Ambra, please, I don't understand."

She frowned and pressed her body into mine, her arm looped around me. "The wormholes. These cloaking efforts. They're *obscene*. Because spacetime and sentience are a unified field. Where there's one, there is the other. Where there's a massive intelligence, or a mass of minds, space and time respond. Where big alterations in continuum exist, dynamic and structured—can you guess?"

I could, but the implications were insane. I caught my breath a moment, thinking through her words. I felt so unafraid to speak to her. I didn't fear judgment, despite my stupidity and blindness. I knew acceptance.

"There is...*a mind?*"

"Yes, Nitin," she squeezed my arm again. "Of a kind. The fabric of our universe is stirring, cogitating, becoming. From its chaotic birth pangs to the complex structures of our era until the singularity of equilibrium. It will grow and become in ways we won't decipher for billions of years. Perhaps our far descendants will comprehend this much more alien and deep thought."

"You understand it now?"

"To recognize it, to feel its living soul, is different from comprehending it. These reckless acts are wounding the structure of this mind. Creating lesions in the cosmic cortex."

"Why do they do it then?"

"Because they are ruined children, born and bred as instruments of war. They're horrible, but I pity them. I know what it is to be an object, Nitin, with no other value other than what purpose you can be to another. To be helpless while altered as

others see fit, never understanding. Drowning in pain, fear, and self-loathing. It creates a consuming desire for vengeance."

I felt my arms tighten around her waist. Her past was rote history for most of us. Not to her. I could see the agony of her enslavement etched in her face. "I'm sorry, Ambra."

The corners of her mouth twitched. "What's driving them is something different. Much *darker*. The Dram do not understand the bargain they've made to acquire this new power."

"The ghost forces?"

"The *Anti*. We pull them now, Nitin. Tempt them terribly for our ordering and our continued growth through time. Our bias of the cosmic background. They will do all they can to destroy us."

"Why? What are they?"

"Our inverses. No more, no less. The shadow of our light. As for them, we're the shade of theirs. Creatures we know little about. Now they have revealed themselves." She sighed and shook her head. "At least it's still small. Still localized. These clones are clumsy and stupid. Raised denied love. Taught without wisdom." She exhaled. "But there are so many."

My thoughts raced, trying to process the implications of her confusing words. "What about the Orbs? Don't they also damage this...intelligence?" I wasn't sure what to call it.

"That's what makes them so beautiful. They don't. They *synergize* with it. They harmonize. Their purpose commingles with the cosmic mind. They're meant for far greater things than our simplistic use of them." She sighed and gazed at the green seaside. Shadows from the alien trees danced across her face as the aurora undulated. The wind tasted of blackberries and chocolate. "Even if it's what brought us here."

I glanced around again. "Where are we?"

She smiled. "One of my favorite places in the galaxy. Or a little outside it. We're orbiting a star on the outskirts of a small satellite cluster of our Milky Way."

My mind searched through the extensive astronomical training required by the MECHcore. "Those are tens of thousands of light years from Earth."

She grinned. "Twenty kiloparsecs."

"Ambra, how?"

"It's teeming with life. Some intelligent. So, there are also Orbs here." She gazed at the swirling cornucopia of colors. "Isn't it beautiful? I've come here many times over the last two centuries. It has been a place to escape the burden of all I must do. All that is asked. A haven to forget, for a moment, all the terrible destinies. Over time, I tired of witnessing it alone. It grew harder to wait for you, even in this heaven."

"Wait for me? You knew...?"

I stopped myself. Of course, she knew. She was the Daughter.

"You spoke my name in dreams," I said, memories flooding back. "You'd never met me, but you called me *love* in the Temple hospital. You speak like we've already lived a life together. Have you seen everything?"

She shook her red curls at me. "Not like you think. The broad outlines, the truth that one day you would come, yes, I knew. The closer events come to me, in space, time, or heart—the more poorly I see. Blame quantum mechanics."

"I don't understand."

"Better to ask Waythrel. I don't get the physics either. What's important is that I didn't know when or what form you would take. I only knew you would come. I could sense you, Nitin. Once you were born, I knew you'd come. I sought you out and watched over you as you grew in India. I came to adore you as a child at your grandmother's country home. A young adult studying late into the nights to pass the Force entrance exams. A grown man—brave, honest, and determined to find me."

I stared at her in wonder. She had seen my entire life. She had known about me for centuries.

"I came to you in Japan. In the Sahara, I tended your bruised mind and learned to love every one of its imperfect contours."

"Ambra—why? I was searching for you! If you knew, why did you wait? Why make me search? Why have we wasted so much time?"

The idea that I was alone and yet not, shook me. Decades of our lives had passed when we could have been together. Panic coursed through me.

"It's not so simple, Nitin," she said, lowering her head. "You're blind in ways I'm not. If we alter certain futures, the ripples can become tsunamis. The fates of our galaxy always rest on my choices. I am never free of it. Even when—especially when—it concerns what is most dear to me. I've known nothing more painful than watching you in silence for decades. Longing to reach out to you, play with you as a child, speak to you as a man. Experience your affection for me openly."

She held my gaze and squeezed my arm. Her eyes shone as her mouth trembled in a frown.

"It's bittersweet. Chodak saw this two hundred years ago and shared his vision. I glimpsed myself through *your* eyes. That day, I learned the depth of your feelings, felt your soul adore me as I had never witnessed a man love a woman."

I swallowed. "Who was he?"

Her shoulders rose and fell as she shook her head. "Someone long dead. A monk and insightful Reader. He forecast your coming to me. He told me we would be married."

My head swam as my heart raced. "Everything with you is a mystery. Every time you speak with me, it's like the universe changes, and I can't keep up."

She pouted. "So you're saying you don't *want* to marry me, Captain Ratava?" Her brows wrinkled, her expression ridiculously charming.

"Ambra, I..."

She continued to sulk, her eyebrows high on her forehead. I felt as if I were leaping into the dark.

"Yes. In fact, I do. Not exactly how I had pictured the subject coming up."

She threw her head back and laughed. Her shoulders shook as she brought the bald surface back down, nestling into my chest. I smelled her hair, and it was a revelation. A thousand pathways in my brain lit to this simple olfaction. My eyes drank in the orange surrounding me. I reached up and stroked her locks, caressing the enormous bulge atop her skull.

"My heart," she said, her laughter fading. Tears filled her blind eyes. "You accept even that. This deformity no human animal should carry before her mate. Who would love such ugliness? Yet, you do."

I placed my hand on her face, stroking the left cheek with my hand. I searched her eyes. I knew they couldn't see into my own. Still her mind could Read the deepest place in my person. Her breath was warm in the cool air, tendrils of fog wrapping around me. My hand appeared black alongside the whiteness of her skin. I cupped my hand and pulled her mouth to mine.

Kissing a goddess is to open more than your flesh to another. You expose your soul.

Our lips met. A limbic thrill shot through my veins. Electricity burned my awareness. We held each other in this embrace on a distant world. Our hands wild, exploring, animated. The fingers of her mind caressed the contours of my consciousness.

Love should always be a mixture of body and spirit. When you kiss a goddess, the greater ecstasy is in the soul.

I pulled back after a few moments. "Daughter. Of Time."

She didn't laugh at my clumsiness. A flame of passion possessed her features, but they were also stained with sorrow.

"Nitin, wait. You must know."

I ached as I stared into her eyes. "Know what, Ambra?"

Tears ran down her cheeks. "Our time can only be short."

I nodded. "It's okay. We have an important task. I understand." I reached for her again.

She eased me back. "No. Not now or here. Not because of the mission. Together, all paths end in darkness."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't see the details, but the broad form is all too clear." Her face twisted in agony. "If you choose to be with me, it will set in motion events that will result in tragedy."

"What tragedy?"

"Your certain death, my love," she said, still as stone.

I focused behind her, the cresting waves filling my sight, my hands resting on her shoulders.

My death?

Many times I had faced oblivion in battle, had seen finality in the casualties nearby. I struggled to imagine my own demise. How to conceptualize one's nonexistence? Yet this prediction came from the Daughter.

I turned back to her. "If we aren't together?"

Her face tightened. "There are countless futures on that path. In most, you will live a long life."

"Without you?"

She grimaced. "Yes."

My words erupted from deep within me. "Then it will be an empty torture. It will be living in the darkest prison."

She gazed at me with a strange pity, but my choice was uncomplicated. The easiest decision for death I could imagine making.

"So then—how long do we have?"

"Oh, Nitin." She clasped me. "Do you want to know?"

I considered her question. If I knew, I'd focus on the date. Obsess over my fate to the exclusion of all else that occurred. She was right. It was better I did not know the hour and live in the moment. With her.

"How will I die?"

"I don't know, my heart. I can't see so near to myself—and you are as close as my own soul." She touched her fingertips to my temple. "It will be monstrous. At the hands of our enemies. We will be shattered by betrayal. In the end, our humanity stolen forever. In return for this terrible price, I can give you so little. A brief time, but a time when we'll love as none ever loved."

She drew her face to mine. Our lips brushed as she whispered, "One short and beautiful dream for all the horror. I had to tell you. You must choose."

My throat caught. "My horror is to leave you. If I'm torn from you, tortured, killed—I can only die once. Walk away? Live each day alone, apart from you—I can't make that choice every moment for the rest of my life. I'm not strong enough."

She wept and smiled. Her hands cupped my face, her fingers slipping over my scalp, sending waves through me. Her body pressed against mine. I felt the swell of her breasts, the warmth of the life within her. I was surrounded by a sea of red.

"Then love me now and until our time ends."

Chapter 21

I submit to you that if a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

We stepped from the Orb projection into the Temple center.

Again, I was disoriented. Pain racked my form. Ambra minimized the discomfort, and while I suffered, it was far less than before. I didn't ask why, as I was sure to misunderstand it. I was just relieved I wasn't about to end up screaming in agony and half dead in front of my team.

The aches lessened, and I felt more than recovered. Better than I remembered in a long time. Alive. *Fulfilled*.

To kiss a goddess is one thing. To make love with her, something entirely different. Our bodies tuned to each other. I had no explanation for it. Perhaps because of how we had already entwined our consciousness. Or for reasons I would discover later.

If sex can be a religious experience on a physical plane, then I had been born again.

The corporeal ecstasy was the lesser of our oneness. I can't tell you much about how our souls connected. How her telepathic powers brought our consciousnesses together. How, as we joined our flesh, we linked our minds. We experienced an eon. A place beyond time. We met in a thousand memories, hers and mine. We bathed in a million desires and fears. Images. Music. Smells. We shuttled through the labyrinth of cognition, a ray of light through an evanescent maze. The walls painted flickering ideas. They mixed and touched. A resonance refashioned the essence of each independent spirit.

I was one person when I journeyed to that alien world overlooking the Milky Way. I left as someone else. The process healed the lingering damage brought on by her clone. Beyond this, I continued to be remade in ways I would come to understand over time.

We stepped out of the swirling colors and into the relative darkness of the Temple, hand in hand. Astonished faces greeted us.

The members of my team debated with Waythrel and Mazandarani. One at a time, they noticed our presence and turned to face us. It took a full minute for us to walk the distance across the expansive floor. During that time, none of the others uttered a sound. We stopped in front of the group.

"It's time," said Ambra.

"Wait a moment," said Williams, her eyes wide. "What the hell just happened? My brain is about to explode from drowning in a sea of information. I wake up, the rest of these bozos with me, but you two are *gone*. Vanished like magic. Next you reappear coming out of that *thing*?"

Moore cooed. "Holding hands like lovers in the park."

The tall alien said nothing to the outburst. Mazandarani stared, his expression devastated. I didn't know what to say.

Ambra took the lead. "We have traveled through the Time Sphere. Nitin has completed his test flights." She smiled at the confused expressions around her. "You didn't think we were going to journey on Strings, did you?"

No one answered. Waythrel spoke. "It is far less efficient, and dangerous now that the Dram control much of the Time Tree. But Ambra can access the portals directly."

"Right," said Kim. "We just have to teleport through that thing." He gawked at the kaleidoscope in the center of the chamber.

"It would be an honor, a life's privilege, Daughter of Time," said Fox, bowing her head.

"So, Captain, hell of a ride?" Moore asked.

I couldn't suppress a laugh. "You have no idea."

"Wicked. I'm game. Don't even know where I'm going, but I'm not going to miss out on surfing that baby."

Ambra considered the others. "The rest of you? You have the information. You know the purpose."

"Something else, all that *sharing*," said Williams. "We should be using it at all the schools."

"Someday we will," Ambra said. "Most people aren't ready. New Earth's Readers are learning from the Xix. Our planet is in the early stages of a group memory, soon to be a communal awareness. A sum far greater than its parts. Earth is waking up."

"I remember," said Kim. "You're going to seal the Orbs!"

"Seal them?" asked Moore. "What does that mean?"

Kim was at a loss for words. "I saw it, but I'll be damned if I can explain it."

The alien spoke. "The Daughter will reconfigure the local projections. The hyperspace filaments will retract. There will be no String on which to navigate. The node will be dead. While we

are there, we will find out what we can about our enemies. If we are lucky, we might run into them or lure them to us."

"We?" asked Fox. "You're coming, too?"

"Your team is short one member," said Ambra. "I've chosen Waythrel to fill the gap."

Williams objected. "That won't complete the group. The exercises are tuned for six trained soldiers. A Xix is an outlier."

The alien addressed her doubts. "In what will come, your previous training will have little relevance. We will not be a military operation. We will be a unique delegation serving as much or more as detectives than as warriors, although fighting may become necessary. I will fit well into this construction."

"Detectives?" asked Kim. "So why us? You don't need fighters. Especially not with her."

"You are fated," said Ambra. "There is no other word for it. No other way to explain it."

"So, can we choose to change our fate? Is that some kind of paradox?" asked Williams.

She smiled. "Only because your mind limits what you can see. Each of your choices is free *and* preordained. The distinction between the two is artificial. Like describing a tree as either soaring into the air or digging into the ground. Contradictory—yet neither false, because a tree is much more than both conceptions."

Waythrel elaborated. "Every decision you make is part of a family of paths propagating through space and time, integrating to a final reality. If you could see the essence of the fabric around us, you would understand a strange truth. You actually will make all possible choices available to you. You are infinite as you create finitude."

My warrant officer shook her head. "I shoulda never put my name down for this crazy assignment." Fox beamed.

Ambra touched my shoulder.

I turned to my team. "Suit up, metalheads!"

We donned our gear. The Xixian skins layered over our forms like some self-aware organism groping its way forward. The process took several minutes. We examined fit, checking specs and performance.

Meanwhile, I watched Mazandarani approach Ambra. They were some ten feet away, but I could hear the exchange. The counselor paused in front of her, his demeanor hesitant and clumsy.

"This fate is cruel, Sepehr," she said.

His eyes stayed toward the ground. "You know my heart, Daughter of Time, so I can only be honest and agree." He pushed his mind to another topic. "You also know my thoughts. Why do you take this risk?"

"I trust him. I *know* him. He'll never hurt me."

"I wish that you had omniscience. A little prescience is a dangerous thing."

She kissed his cheek. A wave of jealousy flowed through me, but it dissipated. Her expression wasn't desire. It was love. An affection and concern I realized was far deeper than what I had feared. I felt ashamed.

"I will come back, Sepehr. And he'll be with me. I need you to prepare for our return and for the ceremony to follow."

"Why do you ask this of me?"

"Because you must walk this path or never be free. I am cruel, perhaps. I also care for you too much to have you enslaved."

He tugged at his beard. "My fear is that I will disappoint you, Daughter. But your disappointment will not be from my failure to try. It will be as you have asked." He stepped away.

Fox appeared before me, blocking my view of the conversation. "We're ready, Captain!"

I examined my team. After what I had experienced, I realized how ridiculous we were. What were a bunch of metalheads thinking to accomplish stepping through an Orb? Traveling

through space and time? Meeting an enemy even Ambra feared and none of us understood?

Waythrel joined Ambra at the edge of the long pathway to the oscillating projection. They motioned, and we followed. Creature-sized depressions lined the walkway on both sides, the seats for Readers forming the Group Mind during the meditation sessions.

She had tried to share this experience with me in our unexplained absence. It went over my head, despite the telepathy. She admitted it was hard for her to understand. The combined mentality of the collective exceeded her own consciousness by an extensive degree. She grasped bits and pieces of the insights on her own. I understood nothing, not a bit or a piece.

We reached the projection. Ambra gestured toward it.

"Step inside; it's safe."

We entered, followed by the alien and the Daughter.

"If you are prepared, I will open the Orb."

I gave a thumbs-up, and the members of my group echoed the gesture. All were nervous. All stared with excitement.

Fox grinned. "Get ready for the trip of your life."

"Or the trip to our death," said Moore.

Ambra's voice was grave. "Both futures have already occurred."

I released a slow breath, and infinity exploded.

Part II

Until you grasp the limitations of Entropy,
you cannot understand the possibilities of Time.

Wisdom of the Six Cities

Chapter 22

How on earth did Descartes, who could not on prima facie evidence accept his existence as real, believe that his thinking was? This was the beginning of the dark ages of European philosophy.

Yin Yu tang

Water.

It dripped. It began in a plastic bag, puffed out, gleaming. A drop traveled through a valve, down clear tubing approaching a bedside. It dove into an adapter with a sharp needle at the end. The tip plunged into the pale skin of an arm.

Ambra's arm.

Her eyes were glassy. I sat beside her and held her hand. It was frigid.

"Nitin, I'm glad you're here. I'm scared."

I gaped at the hospital equipment. "Where are we?"

She sighed, her eyes drooping. "Dreaming. We're journeying again. Traveling layers of awareness. Sailing flying going..."

She was younger. My mind ground into gear, and I pieced together the facts of her life.

"When you were a prisoner on Earth. These are your surgeries, the ones that changed you forever."

The early teen's wan smile failed. "My second surgery. The most terrible."

"The first wasn't?"

She rocked her head on the gurney, slurring her words. "No. Nope. I thought they were going to *cure* me the first time. Take the thing out, like they said. Promised right before they killed Mom and Dad. My vision was going. That scared me. First operation had hope with the fear."

"The next?"

"I knew. Bastard *told* me. 'Making it bigger. You'll be blind soon. Isn't this soooooooo cool?' Freaks R Us. Freaks R Us. Freaks R Us."

I waited for her to calm down. "So, this time, you knew they weren't curing you. They were experimenting on you."

"Yeah. Sucks, huh?" She grinned at me. "You look *really* good. Well, almost blind here, but the me visiting this me, she knows. So many of me. Me, me, me. Clone me. Millions of me. Mmmmm, you smell good, too. Sound good. Bet you taste good."

"Ambra..."

"Going to fall *off* the world, Nitin. Drugs pushing me under the water and outside the universe. Just meat meat meat to them again. Cut, drill, screw, slice. I'm falling to black and sick at my stomach, and they're going to come with saws and drills and screws..."

Tears trickled down the sides of her face as she shook it back and forth. I squeezed her hand and kissed it. "It's okay. You'll be okay. I'm here with you. I'm here with you the whole time. I promise."

Her green eyes flashed open. She gripped my arm, her entire body taut. “Hope to die?”

“I’m not leaving.”

She relaxed and sank back into the pillow. “Okay, I’ll sleep. We’ll go away. To a new place. I just don’t know where...”

She closed her eyes, her respiration slow and shallow. It became rhythmic, louder, pulsing and grasping my attention. Before I perceived the change, everything faded. The hospital room, Ambra, her hand.

A constant rhythm, alone, remained.

I had thought it was her breath—but she wasn’t here. A metronome ticked. Throbbing. Beating.

Rushing.

Water.

Precipitation from towering falls or storm winds through the trees. White noise. Deafening.

The sound focused in front of me. The blurring decreased. The horrors clarified.

Masses of naked men and women cowered against a wall. Robots darted about, blasting high-pressure liquid at them. People struggled to get behind others to ward off the pain.

Those who could. Many lay on the floor or crawled away from the machines. They were hardly human anymore.

It was the smuggler’s ship where the Daughter had almost died. Interstellar merchants who drove their cattle until they dropped. They bought those who had scored poorly in the Dram sorting. My Ambra’s deformity had not been identified for what it was. She was defective, cheap goods. Purchased by smugglers who dragged her to the door of death before the Xix raided the vessel.

I scanned the row of screaming and blistered slaves. *There*.

Near the far corner, crouching into a ball. A mass of red, unkempt, tangled hair running down from a bald top.

I rushed over, the water not touching me, the robots unconcerned. "Ambra!"

I knelt beside her. I hardly recognized her face. She was shivering. Blood vessels decorated her thin skin like some demonic henna pattern. Muscles and fat were gone. A transparent foil covered her skeleton.

More legend. The Daughter from the history books and in the art of our age. It didn't prepare me for what it was like to be in the presence of near-death starvation. I shuddered.

"Go, Nitin." Her voice was a rasp. I bent closer to hear. "Don't see me like this. Let me die."

Dreams within nightmares.

She said I'd experienced her childhood home because it was close to her heart. I was in the hospital because she was deathly afraid and called to me. Now I was here.

"I won't go. I love you, and you're going to survive this. I know you do. You know you do. Remember! I don't know where in time and space or your memories we are, but I'm going to stay with you."

She was too weak to speak. I cradled her as the fingers of the sticklike hand on my shoulder pressed her answer.

"Okay. Don't talk. Feel me here. I'm here. I'm here, I'm here," I said, rocking her in my arms.

She mouthed silently. "Don't stop."

"I won't."

I sat on the floor filthy with human waste. I rocked the wrecked form of my beloved through an ever-slowing passage of time. We swayed, her weightless body flattened to me like a crumbled paper bag. Swinging back and forth. Stronger until we drowned out the screams and silenced the roar of the hoses.

They became muffled disturbances. Beeping of equipment. Quiet filling the oscillations.

Or was it floating?

Yes, bobbing in a dark current. Liquid everywhere.

Water.

My dream. Back in this awful place. The nightmares didn't have a solvent before. When I had floated, I drifted in darkness. Numbness. Emptiness.

And stars.

But I could see it. A faint gloom growing from the giant sea around me. A faded color, pulsing. Inorganic. Without life or sense of purpose. *Rhythm.*

It shone through the fluid. Of this, I was sure. I should be seeing a maze of the Orb light. I was traveling somewhere. All these facts and truths and things hovered just beyond my ability to retrieve. They bled out in a rainbow of colors and dissolved into the green.

My mind thrashed, trying to hold on to...*what?* I was a soldier. I was on a mission. I loved a woman, a singular woman in the universe. I held her hands.

I rocked her to peace, and she is red and white and soared through the clouds of a nebula and a beach where I made love to her under our galaxy in a night breeze.

Things that must be true but dissolve, existing as beliefs in my devolving memory of dreams fading in this throbbing greenness. This water of death.

I tried to move. *I saw!* Motion. Blurred. A hand! I had a hand! Again, I flailed my arm, but it achieved a weak waving, a sickly movement in the mossy ocean. I glimpsed it again. Shape. *I had structure*. Form in fluid.

But no exit, no way to wake from this nightmare. Nothing but stasis and wetness and flailing, feeble limbs. Endless green.

Nitin, come back.

Ambra? I called in my thoughts. *I'm lost!*

Beside my chest, a brightness. A vortex of light whirled in the middle of the water. I peered into its center. A point elongated from the edges, drilling deep into a third dimension. I stared down a long passage.

You aren't lost. You're displaced.

The channel pulled me through the lime liquid. The gyre grew. Luminescence from another space flowing into the dark and drowning sea. Brightening.

I spun, following the strange undulations of the turbulent radiance. Accelerating to greater velocities. Around and over and beside until what remained were glimmering star trails.

I left the molasses and plunged into the swirling tunnel. Buffeted, flipped, stretched, and shoved. A billion suns and years and parsecs flew by my awareness.

I plummeted. The brilliance hurled me from the shaft. Free.

Free!

Floating free above a grand and terrible world of blue. Horizon to horizon. Enormous. Endless.

Water.

Chapter 23

Innumerable suns exist; innumerable earths revolve around these suns in a manner similar to the way the seven planets revolve around our sun. Living beings inhabit these worlds.

a heresy of Giordano Bruno, burned alive at the stake in 1600

So much water.

I lay on my side, racked and shaking. The floor below me, the walls pressing against my forehead, were invisible. A clear glass lacking reflection. It absorbed no moisture from my breath, not smudging from the oils of my skin. A technology that didn't exist.

Underneath me was—nothing. Darkness and stars. Behind me, a warm pressure on my back. Light. Because of the planet before me, I knew it came from a star. We had arrived at Orferlin, world without land.

I rolled onto my back and gazed up at a group of faces. The

alien, monstrous and still. The MECHcore soldiers. And Ambra. She knelt beside me.

"Welcome back, love."

The minimal friction in this strange bubble was disconcerting. I felt unsure of my motions. I pulled myself to a sit, rubbing my temples.

"I thought you said this wouldn't happen again."

"I know." Her smile faded. "It was a massive interference from our enemies. I imagined a possible attack, but nothing so intense."

"They knew our plans," said Waythrel.

I studied my team. They appeared concerned, but unhurt. I needed to make sure.

"What happened? Anyone else affected?"

Placing my hand on an unseen wall, I pushed up. Standing in the bubble, my feet were planted on nothing. The nonexistence held me up.

"No," said the alien. "You are the only one who suffered any deleterious effects."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Captain's a little soft, is all," laughed Moore.

"It's not the first time," said Ambra. "Our enemies are targeting him. Because of me."

Waythrel said nothing.

Williams stepped forward. "W*ho* is targeting us? More of those clones?"

"Thousands of them," said Ambra, her expression grim.

"*Thousands?*" asked Kim.

She sighed. "Their numbers have risen considerably."

"How can there be more? Where are they coming from?" asked Fox.

The alien spoke. "From many spaces and distant times. There is a growing convergence. A massing of the troops, if you will."

"I'm sorry, Nitin," said Ambra. "It was more than I was ready for. An ambush."

"So how the hell did they know our schedule?" asked Williams.

"The same way they found us in the desert," answered Waythrel. "We have been infiltrated. There is a spy among us."

"Whoa—*us*? Time out, okay?" said Kim. "Others besides us knew the mission. What about the counselor? He seemed pretty unhappy with the group. Especially the captain."

"Or even Major Mizoguchi," said Fox. "She's not Force. She works for the Temple. That's unusual. Maybe she's there for a purpose. Don't turn on us because we're the new recruits!"

"Sergeant Moore refused to share with the Daughter," said the Xix.

The sounds of ion chargers filled the space as a suit lit up.

"Hold up, squid-head. I didn't watch my mates torn apart by Dram soldiers on Dworn to listen to this shit. Put up or shut up."

Ambra shook her head, glaring at the extraterrestrial. "Enough. There are many possibilities, including a bunch we likely haven't thought of. Mazandarani and Waythrel suspect a mole. But there are forces gathering with powers I haven't probed. We've no reason to doubt each other. More importantly—we're going to need one another if we are to complete this mission. Distrust will poison us."

Purge your minds of it.

A mental slap. Everyone shuddered. She was angry, and it was the first time I had felt her wrath. It was frightening, as much for her power as for how far she was holding back.

"I said I don't want anyone in my head!" shouted Moore.

"Switch off your weapons unless you're going to engage our enemies!" she growled.

His mouth tightened, and he glared at her. It wasn't anger. He

was sizing her up, respect in his eyes. The humming ceased as his suit switched off.

"We have a task to complete," she continued, her tones softened.

"Where are we?" I asked. Too much was unexplained.

"Orferlin," cut in Williams. "You shared, right? Dolphin world."

"I know the planet and the facts. I remember." I gestured to the invisible bubble. "I mean *this*. What's this? An advanced ship? Is it Xixian?"

Waythrel spoke. "No, Captain. This is beyond the ingenuity of our technologists."

"It's my doing," said Ambra. "A distortion and warping of spacetime. It's a three-space vessel to carry us. I can expand or contract it in multiple hidden dimensions. This gives us volume enough for weeks of air, munitions, food. Anything we require, we've brought with us from New Earth."

"Toilets?" asked Moore.

"With privacy, Sergeant, in case you're shy," she answered with a grin. "Also air and filtration. Hidden away but functioning."

He smiled back.

"And quite defensive," said the Xix. "Except for an overpowering clone attack, there are no weapons the Dram possess that can harm us."

"What of those *Anti*?" asked Fox.

"We'll see," said Ambra. "For now, we need to find out what we can from the inhabitants. Once we've investigated, we seal this node of the Time Tree. We have two more stops to go before we're done."

Chapter 24

What makes planets go around the sun? At the time of Kepler some people answered this problem by saying that there were angels behind them beating their wings and pushing the planets around an orbit. As you will see, the answer is not very far from the truth. The only difference is that the angels sit in a different direction and their wings push inward.

Richard Feynman

The descent to the planet's surface was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. Lacking a viewscreen, a hologram—*without walls*—it was as if we were free-falling from the fringe of space. The enormous expanse of water expanded until it eclipsed our external vision.

I pressed against the invisible barrier of the bubble. The pressure provided some feedback to calm my anxiety. We were stable. We weren't pitching forward to our deaths with nothing to support us. Several members of my team mimicked my motions.

The ride was disturbingly smooth. We broke into the

atmosphere absent a shudder. No turbulence. Nothing to indicate we were moving relative to the planet at all. The darkness of space receded. Clouds swam over us. The oceans continued to grow before our eyes, everything quiet.

We dropped into a gigantic storm, dwarfing anything occurring on New Earth. Orferlin was nearly twice the size of our world, with more than ten times the surface water. So much moisture and a tropical temperature cooked up some continent-sized tempests. Straight into the heart of one of these beasts, we flew. All light vanished. Colossal bursts of lightning interrupted the darkness. We plunged through the innards of a nuclear explosion.

Yet, silent. The rain poured over our enclosure without the sound of a drop. Electrical flashes were never followed by a rumble. Our vessel had not a single tremor in the midst of this overwhelming display of nature.

"It's so quiet," I said, my voice nearly a whisper.

"You want to hear it?" asked Ambra.

"It's possible?"

"Yes."

I turned to the others. "If it's okay with everyone."

No one protested. She grinned like a schoolgirl.

Then listen!

The bubble exploded in cacophony. Howling winds and stunning cracks of lightning were swallowed by bone-rattling thunder. We glided unaffected through this. Somehow, she'd allowed only the sound to penetrate. It humbled the greatest thunderstorm on New Earth.

"By the Daughter," said Fox, her eyes wide.

"Beats anything I've ever seen," echoed Kim.

The tempest roared around our enclosure while we continued our rapid descent. As we neared the bottom of the storm system, we cleared its shadow and left it seething behind us. A blinding

light erupted, bathing us in the alien hues of the local star. The ocean roiled beneath us, extending in all directions to the horizon.

We decreased our altitude, and the crests of waves resolved. They appeared no different from those of Earth's seas from a distance. Nearing the surface, our bodies served as a reference point, and the true size of these giants revealed themselves. Towering over the grandest Pacific swells, those on Orferlin were mountains. They loomed over our bubble, blocking out the starlight. They broke over us with bedlam, causing no disturbance inside.

This planetary ocean was *loud*. Everything you might expect from an Earth sea multiplied many fold. Small mice in a tempest, we stood speechless before the planet's strength.

"So, we go swim with the dolphins, eh?" asked Moore.

Ambra sighed. "I wish we could. The Brax aren't much like our world's water mammals."

Waythrel elaborated. "They have organs resembling gills more than lungs, although mechanistically neither. Theirs is a strange and rich culture. It stems from a distributed nervous system. More than ten neural-nodules across their bodies. They may resist damage that would render human or Xixian mental faculties impaired."

Ambra smiled. "The nodes recombine in spacetime to form the most beautiful patterns of thought. Braxian Readers are second only to the Xix in our galaxy." She lost the conversational thread, staring forward over the endless, oceanic expanse. "I wish we had the time to spend—" Her face clouded. She was in pain.

"What is it?" I asked.

She took my hand. "Something's wrong." She trembled. "Something's happened to Orferlin."

"What?" asked Williams.

We all stared at the bright blue world in front of us.

"Something terrible."

We hovered over scenes of destruction.

The Brax inhabited underwater cities engineered from coral-like substances. They had long ago learned to modify and employ them as building materials. Depending on the density of the shells, they were able to build far below the surface. These floating, submerged metropolises had housed billions of their kind. Solar, tidal, and fusion energies powered their civilization. Strong images from the sharing filled my thoughts. The intricacy of their curvilinear constructions. The labyrinthian tunnels exploding outward like filigree, spanning kilometers. They dwarfed our largest land-based cities.

Now all was ruin. Bobbing on the waves were the blasted remains of the coral masterpieces. Fragments floated like a snowstorm of shattered china from a distance. Diving into the sea, we saw other structures had sunk to varying depths. Ambra sped the bubble around the globe at blinding velocities. We verified this carnage wasn't isolated but worldwide. No sign of life remained. No evidence that the Brax were anything but exterminated.

"The Dram, all right," said Williams. "Fuckers like nothing better than a good genocide to make a point."

"They usually just roast the whole planet," said Fox. "But Orferlin is fine."

"Not exactly fine," said Moore.

The Xix spoke, its voice subdued. "Is there nothing you can detect?"

Ambra crouched in a meditative position, her legs crossed with her arms on her knees. Her eyes were closed. "There's more than an absence, Waythrel," she said, her concentration unwavering. "There's an interference. A poison in space and time."

"Wait, what does that mean?" asked Kim.

"I don't know," she said. "I've never felt anything like it. I sense it sickening our sentience."

Waythrel paced in the bubble. "This is not the Dram."

"No, Waythrel, it isn't. Something else. I need to understand what's happening."

"We shouldn't stay here long unless we can shield ourselves," said the alien.

"Well, if Supergirl here doesn't know what's going on, I agree," said Moore. "Let's pull back until we have some idea what we're dealing with."

"Not yet!" cut in Ambra. Her face was drawn. "There *is* a signal, even in this poisonous cloud. Faint. Fading." A sorrow came over her face. "*Caga*. I hear her."

"Caga?" I asked.

Waythrel answered. "A penetrating Reader of the Brax. We often communed with her from the Temple."

"*From* New Earth?" asked Fox with awe.

"Distance is deceptive."

The bubble accelerated out of the sea and burst over the water's surface. We darted like a missile toward the northern regions. I couldn't process the environment outside. It blurred into a multicolored brushstroke on either side of us. In front and behind were small circles of focus.

"She's calling us," Ambra said. "And she's dying."

Chapter 25

I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too. I feel the suffering of millions.

Anne Frank

We found Caga near one pole of the planet.

The destruction mirrored what we saw around the globe. Somehow, the creature had survived within a spacecraft. The ship floated without power on the waves, and Ambra brought our bubble beside it. Nestled alongside a craft as big as an island, she projected a bizarre filament toward the walls of the vessel. To our complete amazement, the tunnel passed right through the barrier. We gazed down the passageway, and it was empty of matter. The wall was gone, but she insisted it was still there.

"The channel is outside the space of the material," she explained as we followed her down the corridor. The sides were transparent, the inside of the structure open to us.

The reverse of a human transport, the chambers were liquid-

filled for these aquatic organisms. Except for the rooms where damage had occurred and air flowed in. Her passage created no disruption in the construction. Water surrounded us.

We approached a central cavity, a giant chamber the size of a sports stadium. Thousands of bizarre extraterrestrials floated directionless.

The best our minds could do was map their form to New Earth's sea creatures. Fluidics dictated streamlined forms. It was as close to a dolphin as they got. I discerned fins of some kind, more like webbed tentacles. They possessed optical and auditory organs across their bodies, pairing with their neural clusters. Without a directionality, their appendages could accelerate them in any direction. I imagined it would have been amazing to watch them swim.

But the motion here was haphazard. Lifeless corpses floated along the currents in the dead ship. All but one.

The passage Ambra constructed ended at a medical pod. A single Braxian hung with tubes penetrating its body. The visual tissues, multifaceted gem faces, rotated and tracked our approach.

"Caga."

She spoke as the ingress stopped beside the dying creature. Placing her hand against the edge of the bubble, the membrane flowed outward. She extended her arm until the surface of the spacetime distortion fit it like a tight glove. She stroked the side of the alien and closed her eyes. Waythrel stood as a statue, its eyestalks wrapped around themselves like a braid.

"I can speak with her telepathically," said Ambra. "She has consented for me to share with you as I do, if you want to participate."

My team traded glances, eyes settling on Moore.

"Ah, fuck it. Okay," he said. "There isn't going to be anything but fucked up on this trip. Blast away, girl."

Mental view ports opened. Through them, I could see—or rather sense—the thoughts of others. The humans. Incomprehen-

sible images from Waythrel. Foggy but understandable concepts of this ocean being. Dominating all impressions, the Daughter of Time herself.

You must leave our world. It is not safe.

The creature's intellectual processes spilled as from a distance. Whether because I struggled with parsing them or from its decaying state, I didn't know.

Ambra responded.

We're okay for now. Whatever's happening, I can deflect its effects for a time.

You will grow weary.

Yes. You don't have much time, dear Caga. What happened?

The Braxian's perspective swam across its body, but its thoughts were strong.

The Dram came. Once to claim the Orb Strings and guard them. The Time Tree is compromised. We thought we were spared worse. Until five Orferlin cycles ago—several weeks your time—they returned. They laid waste to everything.

It shared images of the terrible enemy armada. Explosions, the deaths of billions, the emotions of a species watching itself die. A cataclysm. It crushed me, the horror and pain. I tried to block it out but failed. I'm not sure how much time passed as the impressions ran through me, but it was likely short moments.

They could not kill all of us. Their transports departed. Then the Anti came.

The shadow ships flowed out from the Orb like a polluted tide. Black spots like flies separated from the main contingent of dark vessels. They stationed themselves equidistant across the planet, inducing madness.

They left drones and returned to the Strings and were gone. There is something evil in those machines.

The poison. Ambra's thoughts were a warm light in this sea of strangeness.

Yes. We tried to salvage our people, but all things began to fail. Technology decayed. We lost our power, our infrastructure. Everything. Within days, nothing functioned. Next, our minds. The weakest-minded of us went first. Forgetfulness. Unreason. In the end, lunacy. As Readers, a few of us could defend our consciousness longer from the ravages.

I waded through visuals of horror.

I lasted the longest, because my ship returned from space and was in orbit for the assault. I landed after the slaughter, lucky to have escaped immediate destruction. A last group of medics sought to lessen the effects by trial and error, working with deteriorating technology. They have me attached to desperate therapies. They are all dead. They have but delayed the inevitable. I am glad you have come.

Caga, no. A terrible sadness bled from Ambra.

There is no time to save my world or me. You and Waythrel have my memories. Take them, use *them, and find a way. You must leave before this poison overwhelms you.*

The bewildering complexity of the Xixian brain engaged.

She is right. We should not risk staying here any longer. She cannot be moved. Insanity will claim her tomorrow.

I don't know how the Xix knew this, but I couldn't process most of the images coming from it. Trying to digest its concepts produced a headache. I saw Ambra's shoulders slump.

A human idea interspersed.

What if we can destroy the drones in orbit?

It was Fox. I could sense her personality. Her mind raced, an empathy for both the dying alien and the pain of the Daughter driving her thoughts like a whip.

Caga responded. *It is likely impossible. We utilized what forces we had left. They did not return.*

Fox dismissed the objection. *You were weakened. Your technol-*

ogy, decaying. She can protect us. We're soldiers. We can send a small team, to avoid risk to the others.

I don't know if I can shield you. It was Ambra. *The toxicity becomes stronger nearer the source. I can see it in the odd arrangement in spacetime. Almost the erasing of patterns.*

Fox was undeterred. *We can! It would stop, and we might be able to save her!*

Unlikely, responded Waythrel.

We have to try!

"I'll go," spoke Kim out loud. His emotions conveyed his determination.

I stared at the pair. "Are you sure?"

The Xix admonished us. "It is too dangerous."

Caga's thoughts were strong. *It is too late for me. But for you, for others—the risk may be worthwhile. To know if there can be an engagement with these devices. If the result is negative, you can take that answer and the details of the failure with you to devise countermeasures.*

Waythrel's eyestalks uncoiled, and several eyes pivoted toward Fox and Kim. "It is probable that you both will die."

Kim's suit powered up. A second later, Fox's did as well.

Kim smiled. "Well, the Daughter has protected us from equipment decay so far. Guns still good."

Fox spoke. "Besides, every mission has probabilities of death in this war. I have faith in Ambra Dawn."

You have love for me, Erica Fox. I thank you, but you have more trust than I deserve.

Fox beamed. "Humble to the end."

"There is a last consideration," said Waythrel. "Caga noted that the Dram returned to destroy this planet, after leaving it be. Orferlin poses no risks to them. It has always been a peaceful world riding the currents of the galactic struggles. Why annihilate it? The node was secure. Why spend the resources? Why do so in a

time frame nearly identical to when we ourselves planned this mission?"

Williams ended the long silence. "The traitor again? You think details were leaked. You think it's sabotage."

"I am raising the possibility," said Waythrel.

"If so, it could also be a trap," I said.

"There's no way to know, and meanwhile, this planet is dying." Kim glared at me. "Sir, do we have permission?"

I had to make a choice. Send them to a likely death they ignored in their bravado? Or deny them their bravery and the chance for us to know more about our enemy's terrible weapons? Either way, I would be responsible.

"Permission granted, soldiers. Ambra, can you take us up to one of those devices?"

I felt her resignation. She broke off the group sharing and paused for several minutes. I guessed she was communing with the two alien Readers in private. Without comment, she opened her eyes, stood, and walked toward my team.

"We'll try."

The lamina wrapped about us and pulled itself out of the Braxian ship at high speed. We merged with the main bubble. The enclosure rocketed upward faster than a starship into the blackness.

Chapter 26

I know there is a God because in Rwanda, I shook hands with the devil. I have seen him, I have smelled him and I have touched him.

Lieutenant General Roméo Dallaire

We could all feel the disease as the dark object came into view. A combination of fatigue and disorientation sickened us, like a flu without the fever.

Moore scowled. "Feels like the worst fucking hangover I've ever had."

Ambra piloted the bubble by focusing on the source of corruption from the drone. We had no equipment, no scanners, *no ship.* I doubt any technology we or our allies had could measure and detect the noxious force. It was like a hole in the night. At this distance, it appeared to be a sphere of unlight at least twice the size of our enclosure.

Ambra's face was tight. "There's an essence to this thing that's against everything I understand. It's like the nature of the object

fights understanding itself. I don't dare go any closer. I may not be able to protect us if this gets much stronger."

I stared at my soldiers. They stood together, gazing into the emptiness.

"This thing's nasty," I warned. "No shame in dropping the mission."

Fear filled their eyes, but also determination. Fox spoke for them. "Hell, there isn't. Since when do we back down from the enemy?"

"When there's nothing to be won. We outthink it, come back more prepared."

"That's just it, Captain," said Kim. "We don't even know enough to run away yet. Time we found out more."

They were set on it.

"Ambra, can you make separate bubbles for them? Maintain a link like the tunnel on Orferlin, pull them back if things go wrong?"

She shook her head. "I can try. It might be that this force will sever the connection. I might not be able to bring them back."

"Well, then we'd better make sure we kick its ass," said Kim, the pitch-changing hum of his ion slingers sounding.

"I don't like this," said Moore. "Very bad feeling. Whatever this thing does, it's like some fucking crime against the universe."

Ambra startled. "Yes, Sergeant. That's *exactly* how it feels to me. A violation. Against the structure of our existence. Fighting anything that could possibly be us."

Moore stared fixedly at the pair. "Don't mess with it."

"Damn, never figured you to be the one to chicken out," said Kim.

"I think he's right," echoed Williams, nodding toward Moore.

Fox rolled her eyes. "Now you too."

Williams turned to me. "It's the wrong call, Captain. Gut tells me so."

The weight of this decision was becoming enormous. "Waythrel, you were cautioning us before. What is your feeling now that you see it?"

The tall alien didn't have a shudder reflex as far as I know. Its mannerisms suggested the same sentiment. "There is sickness in the blackness. An *unlife* is perhaps a better phrase. It has killed a world. But Caga was correct. If we are to face this challenge, we need information. There is one way to obtain it."

Kim agreed. "Right on! Then it's settled, yeah? 'Cause I'm getting a little nuts debating this here."

"Ambra?" I was desperate for surety.

"The fields of the Anti block my vision. I can't follow the possible paths. The endings hold more death than life."

Fox engaged the helmet, and the mechanism grasped her skull and assembled over it. Her words came out from the speakers, amplified and artificial. "Life through action!"

Kim followed suit.

I sighed. "Okay, but we're yanking you back at the first sign of trouble."

We would never get that chance.

They lined up against the wall facing the dark drone, and Ambra carved out a separate space for each of them. Two bubbles detached from the main enclosure and floated out toward the device. Every hundred meters or so, she would test the connection and pull them backward to ensure she still had control over their capsules.

They reported back at all steps. The sickness in body and mind increased, but they asserted it was manageable.

"Might need to hurl soon," said Kim, "but otherwise, okay."

"I'm having some visual problems," Fox said. "Can't focus on the thing. Can't keep it centered in my vision, either."

"Yeah, me too," he echoed. "Don't know how we're going to

shoot it like this. Telemetry's gone all funky." He paused. "Hell, the whole HUD is flaking out on me."

"Then we pull you back," I said, turning to Ambra.

She sat again, concentrating on maintaining the projections despite the disturbances from the drone.

"Wait, not yet," said Kim. "Hard to see, but I'm making out some structure."

A harsh static crackled over my communications, and I saw both their suits darken. A total loss of power despite the mini-reactors in the chassis. Their bodies dropped to the bottom of their enclosures. Neither moved.

"A pulse!" Ambra gasped.

I felt it too, as if my eyes were being driven into my skull with knives. I crouched to one knee and tried to stay conscious.

"Away!" yelled Waythrel.

Through the headache, I squinted out of our vessel. We sped from the thing, the duo still in tow.

The Orb flared, equaling a star's brightness. As the toxic radiation from the drone bathed us, the light countered the effects. She steered the bubble closer to the Time Sphere, and soon things normalized.

Until we pulled my soldiers back into the enclosure.

I've seen horrors on the battlefield. Flechette injuries and deaths that are inconceivable. Something your mind can't envision. Direct experience is required.

I wasn't prepared for what we brought in.

Kim and Fox—they were dead. Beyond killed, gutted. Dissolved. *Unmade* in a fashion no weapon I had experienced could achieve. The MECHcore suits, these products of superior Xixian technology, were ancient artifacts discovered in some tomb. Aged ten thousand years. The structure of the metals and plastics came apart. Disintegrating. Words floundered. Matter didn't behave this way.

The effects were grisly. Decayed metal and plastic are one thing, flesh and bodies something else. Their remains oozed out of the pocked holes in the wrecked mechs like a tomato purée. The biochemical bonds holding tissues, bone, and cells together failed completely. Nothing recognizably human remained in their appearance at all. The demonic device had reduced two members of my team to a homogenized sludge of constituent ingredients.

The smell hit us.

"Captain, what the *fuck*?" hissed Moore, his face strained, green and sickened.

Williams averted her eyes, her hand to her mouth. We all stepped back from the sight in shock.

I stammered. "Dear God. I don't know."

Ambra wrapped her arms around me from behind. "I'm so sorry, Nitin. I couldn't stop it."

I pressed her hands into mine, a child comforted by the warmth and physical presence of another. Monsters were real in this universe, but I had never seen something so monstrous occur in it.

Waythrel alone maintained composure. "We will have to deal with your sorrow and examine these developments later. We have more urgent matters to attend to."

"Jesus, squid!" yelled Moore, flashing wild eyes at the alien. "The Orb Strings can wait a few minutes!"

"Yes, I'm sure that they can," the Xix answered. "But I don't think that the Dram warship approaching us will."

Chapter 27

The observed macroscopic irreversibility is not a consequence of the fundamental laws of physics, it's a consequence of the particular configuration in which the universe finds itself. In particular, the unusual low-entropy conditions in the very early universe, near the Big Bang. Understanding the arrow of time is a matter of understanding the origin of the universe.

Sean Carroll

We followed the alien's outstretched arm. Twelve digits pointed to space, twitching with a suppressed anxiety.

The warship was Dram all right. Huge, rendering our small bubble an ant beside an elephant. Ugly in a way their aesthetic always appeared to me, possessed of an inherent malice from the point of design. Sharp edges glinted like blades. Terraced, bulky levels like prison floors. The surface pitted and etched as if from acid. The weapons arrayed fore and aft required no hateful intention to convey their purpose.

"A trap!" yelled Williams.

I turned to Ambra. She knelt over the bodies, the pool of remains spreading and nearing her black robes. The seeping sludge slowed and stopped. The two forms floated away from the main enclosure in their own external bubble.

"We need to do something," I prodded.

She stood. "Their remains are in a time stasis that will preserve them until we can examine what happened." She walked forward and rested beside Waythrel. "Only this ship?"

"Yes," said the alien. "It should not pose a danger."

"Unless they have the tech that destroyed Orferlin and killed Nitin's soldiers."

"Do you think it's possible?" I asked.

Eyes darted toward her.

"I am unsure of everything now," she said. "Something tells me it would be as deadly to the Dram as to us. For now, we assume they're armed as usual."

Bright trails erupted from the vessel.

The Xix spoke. "They behave predictably. Incoming missiles!"

Ambra raised her arms, her verdant eyes disappearing behind closing lids. "Then we respond to them as always."

The Orb flashed. Limbs of light sprang from the sphere and crossed the distance to us before I could blink. They wrapped themselves around the projectiles and detonated them far from our capsule.

As I processed the rapid exchange, the Dram fired beam weapons. Ten different rays at our bubble, the coherent radiance dizzying, meters from my face. Stopped in their tracks by offshoots of the glimmering tendrils.

After twenty seconds of full burn, the bugs wised up. They'd drain their power supplies. They'd thrown everything at us, enough firepower to melt entire cities on New Earth. We weren't scratched. The ship arced away.

"Chickenshit bastards!" cried Kim.

"They're rabbiting, all right," laughed Moore. "Damn me, I've heard what you could do with those things, sister, but, well, *damn!*"

"We're going to board them," said Ambra. "Find out what the hell is going on."

"Board them?" asked Williams. The cruiser was already aligning its panel of engines toward us, readying for a String jump. "Well, first you gotta stop it."

The enormous tendrils unfolded into sheets of light. The membranes surrounded the warship. The thrusters fired, the raging ion blasts distorting the glow around the hull.

It went nowhere. The monstrosity belched forth more power than half the New Earth navy but couldn't move.

The warrant officer shook her head. "Guess I had that coming."

Ambra opened her eyes. For the first time, despite witnessing her deeds in the Saharan battle, I experienced a moment of the religious reverence so many felt for her. Such raw potency compelled worship in feeble creatures of flesh and blood.

But as I connected with those eyes, affection eclipsed the awe. An all-consuming devotion not to a divinity, but to her person. My lover. My beautiful and terrible and sad Ambra Dawn.

The bubble sped toward the paralyzed Dram war boat. Her plan was solid. She could read their minds. The history books recounted the stories from her captivity. They couldn't hide anything from her. Unless they opted for suicide. If we moved quickly enough, they'd be helpless before her. We could find out what this dark enemy was up to and how to defeat them.

The Anti had other plans. As we approached, she darted her head to the side and gasped. I followed her gaze, and beside the Dram vessel, a crack appeared in space itself. A massive shadow boiled through the fissure. Its form was cloaked from light and

difficult to discern. I felt in my stomach the same unease I had experienced at the death drone.

"A ghost ship!" I cried.

She knew, but it was too late. A spray of particles aimed at the warcraft came from the shadows.

Ambra screamed. "Close your eyes, everyone! Turn away!"

I did as told.

The impact was pure energy. A nova. The bubble turned pitch black as she sought to block the radiation. Despite her efforts, sufficient quantities penetrated to make the interior bright enough to hurt through closed eyelids. The temperature inside spiked. Within seconds, sweat soaked my clothes even with the MECH-core climate control. I didn't think we could last long in this flux.

Without warning, it ended. I glanced around the enclosure. No one was harmed. I ran to her side.

"I'm okay, Nitin."

I peered into her eyes and kissed her, holding her body to mine.

"What happened?" asked Moore, his face pale.

"We lost our catch," said Waythrel. "The Dram vessel is destroyed."

"How? Why?" asked Williams. "Where's the wreckage?"

"Annihilated," said Ambra. "Converted to pure energy by an interaction with antimatter."

She was right. The warcraft had vanished, and an enormous amount of radiation had been released. It was exactly what one might expect in a matter-antimatter collision.

We were not alone. The shadow ship hovered beside us.

Ambra set her mouth into a thin line. "Let's see how they respond to the full power of the Orb."

She closed her eyes once more. For a moment, nothing happened. A total silence in the bubble. The Anti craft didn't move.

A dim light glowed from the Time Sphere. The radiance intensified, broadened into multiple wavelengths. It flashed, the brightness outshining the exploding Dram warship.

She directed the energy. It rushed forward at a speed I could follow, like some glowing fist thrown at the body of our foes. I couldn't imagine what it was going to do.

The shadow ship didn't wait around to find out. The Anti had prepped a jump on a local String. The same entity lashing out at the enemy provided a door to the Time Tree, and our enemies stepped through it. The unlight vanished, leaving the star-filled dark of regular space in its place.

"No!" Fury burned in Ambra's tones. "I should have sealed the node and then dealt with them. Stupid pride! I was too ready to show them justice! I let them escape."

Waythrel approached Ambra. "The positive news is that they were afraid of you. Whatever technology they possess, they were not willing to go up against you and the Orb."

"Yeah, but they were sharp enough to take out the Dram boat," said Moore. "Didn't defend the bastards from us, you'll notice. Not much love there. They didn't want us getting them or any information."

"Another encouraging sign," clipped the alien. "They fear knowledge falling into our hands. They are vulnerable."

Ambra smiled at the Xix. "Yes."

"This means there is far more hope for our cause than we might have had before their attack," it finished.

Hope?

Perhaps. It felt abstract. I gazed out of the enclosure behind us to the smaller bubble holding the time-frozen corpses. Failure swept over me. Responsibility mismanaged. *I* had allowed the mission to occur. Their deaths were in my ledger.

We moved toward the Orb. Ambra sealed the Time Tree Strings to shut down this first of three nodes.

This trip was too much to process. It had begun with another tortuous traversal for me. We found a world slaughtered and poisoned. An enemy possessed terrible weapons we hardly understood.

Yet these same forces feared us. Shadows fled the Daughter in her wrath. They murdered allies to prevent interrogation.

Those last thoughts comforted me some. In the midst of my sadness and revulsion, despite the fear and uncertainty, a ray of sunlight. A hope.

As always, the hope depended on Ambra Dawn.

Chapter 28

The atoms or elementary particles themselves are not real; they form a world of potentialities or possibilities rather than one of things or facts.

Werner Heisenberg

We left without doing anything more with the drones surrounding the globe. We feared someone had betrayed our mission. Delay risked giving our enemies more time to prepare.

Orferlin had already perished. The Dram and the shadow device destroyed all hope of reviving it. What sealed our decision was the death of Caga. After the Anti ship escaped, we returned to the surface to find the creature dead. The last of her kind in sterilized seas.

Ambra stared at the planet as she guided us toward the Orb for transit. Her expression was inscrutable. Sadness, guilt, fear, and expectation were turbulent waves passing over her features. I leaned against her arm, holding her cold hand. How was I to

comfort her when she gazed at the extinction of an entire world? We retreated from a culture she had known in a deep communion.

Waythrel twitched at her side, its eyes gazing backward and forward. The translator filled the alien's words with sorrow. "Such waste. So many beautiful creatures. Magnificent minds. So much unmade and lost."

Ambra's spoke under her breath. I strained to hear.

"Not lost. Never wasted." Her eyes danced between the Xix and me, tears welling. "Waiting for a time of harvest."

I waited for an explanation, but she said nothing more. The alien didn't probe. I let Ambra have the space she needed to mourn. I'd never seen her so heavy with loss.

The presence of a possible traitor at our highest levels put the rest of us on edge. Despite her efforts to prevent paranoia, distrust grew in our team. Too many coincidences mounted. The Dram pounced at what should have been arbitrary star systems. They placed an army and a False Dawn at the Temple, through Xixian defenses. At the moment of the Daughter's speech. I could see no other conclusion—we were betrayed.

Which of us to suspect? If it was to be one of our group on this strange mission, it couldn't be the Daughter or her closest advisor. A Xix betraying the cause? It was beyond unthinkable. That left the two remaining members of my team. While it was true I had not known them long, serving together in combat reveals a lot about a person.

There is something raw and unfiltered about placing your life on the line in front of others. It's hard to hold a lie in your eyes when your death is staring you in the face. I had been with Moore and Williams. I had seen them face annihilation. I trusted them. Moore had overcome his dislike of mental sharing. Ambra had reported nothing. His thoughts must have been clear of treachery.

It left me with the other members of Ambra's inner circle. My mind immediately focused on Mazandarani. It was partly jealousy.

Anger at his suspicions of me. My judgment was biased. His suspicion itself became suspect in this growing paranoia. Did he do it to cast eyes off himself and onto an innocent? Had his hatred of me pushed him into apostasy? Men had turned traitors for less. But it seemed unlikely Ambra would have missed such thoughts in him. He too had shared with the Readers, despite not being one.

Last of all, the major. Mizoguchi wasn't the type, but now I questioned everything. Could she have concealed duplicity from the Daughter any better than Mazandarani? Could anyone? Spies would seem to be impossible in the presence of the galaxy's most potent psychic.

"We will be shattered by betrayal."

Her words spoken on that glowing beach beneath the Milky Way. But who?

None of the potential traitors held up under scrutiny. It was a mystery I despaired of solving. So it was a quiet, far less adventurous journey through the Orb to our second destination. Doubts consumed. We mourned two of our members, whose bodies we carried with us like some surreal baggage. I was also anxious about the transit. Once again, I became ill, but the effects were lessened. Ambra worked to shield us from the vulnerabilities inherent in the traversal. I remembered no dream this time.

Entering the new star system, I had recovered enough to process my environment. Our small bubble was orbiting an enormous violet-green gas giant that humbled Jupiter. It had no name from its inhabitants. The Xix named the world Gyl, and so we called it.

My mind played over the reams of data I had absorbed from the sharing. The creatures of Gyl were bizarre, defying categorization. Language itself was an artificial construct for them. The entities had developed it after years of mental communion with the Readers led by Ambra. The work was a concession to help divergent forms of life communicate.

Their homeworld was so enormous it contained enough mass to fuse deuterium in its core. It was as much a failed star as a planet. Its system rode on one of the spiral arms of the galaxy near the center. That explained the bright and dense constellations. The night skies of New Earth were dim and impoverished in comparison. It was located closer to their system's sun than our Jupiter. The atmosphere was hot, the weather violent, especially in the upper layers.

Like most gas giants, hydrogen dominated its composition. A smaller amount of helium was also present. These elements were gases at the surface of the planet's outer regions. They transitioned to multiple alternative phases nearer the core.

The center resembled the inner planets of our star system. Trace amounts of heavier atoms formed in the death throes of giant stars sank to the bottom of Gyl. This dense sphere was many times larger than our homeworld. It strained under tremendous forces. Matter adopted modes outside the models of our knowledge.

It was the areas directly above the rocky heart that were the habitat of intelligence. In those layers brooded a sentience I found almost impossible to consider alive. The environmental extremes compelled the particles to adopt bizarre physical states. New Earth science stumbled with a foggy grasp of their properties. The Xix understood more, but the explanations were beyond my comprehension.

A near-crystalline configuration of hydrogen was the crux. Not a solid or a liquid, it existed as an ordered aggregate. Its interactions with other pseudo-symmetric elements created a novel, unEarthly chemistry. In this dynamic evolved a fantastic form of being. One so outlandish, it called into question my conceptions of life itself.

Examining existence with such seriousness brought on a disorientation. What were *we*, exactly? Atoms on their own have

no will, no purpose. Nothing but constraints based on "laws" of physics (whatever those really are).

Somehow, under the conditions of our homeworld—temperature, radiation from the sun, elemental composition, pressure—these atomic entities formed organized structures. At one point, some of them obtained the ability to replicate, copy themselves. The process of "survival of the stable" took over. Evolution produced increasingly diverse and able molecules, cells, bodies—*minds*.

Could our ideals of love and beauty, the abstractions of mathematics and logic, all come from a dance of particles? It struck me as strange that my consciousness derived from carbon chains and water. In fact, it made no sense at all.

My exposure to the alien life should have broadened my views. I ought to have been more open to the idea of what life, and particularly *mind*, could be in this universe. Especially after learning about Ambra and the group sharings.

Still, I was stuck in the biases of Earth. *Obvious, logical,* and *reasonable* have for us small and closed meanings. The cosmos was lecturing me about their relativity.

The atoms of hydrogen, helium, and the trace elements did not form the direct substrate for life on Gyl. The quasi-crystalline lattices *themselves* did. I formed a poor and distorting analogy to explain it to myself. In my idea, I began with the molecules and chemical bonds forming the basis of our bodies. I mapped them to the lattices and interlattice interactions of different crystals in the alien atmospheric levels. A higher-level crystal-chemistry sat above the basic atomic bonding.

No doubt the Xix would have a laugh at my efforts.

The sharing with Ambra confused me further. These structures transcended crystals across the span of the living layers. Critical to the evolution of intelligence was that they were also *crystals in time*. Repeated arrays occurred at cyclic time points and not

necessarily in space. New Earth science had begun tackling such ideas. Waythrel noted our theories were embryonic and based on a lot of incorrect thinking.

So my lessons went. In this wild world, there existed a wonderland for those wishing to study the full potential of this form of matter. I would have normally left them to it, but nothing was normal in our mission.

The result was a life-form in a state without analogy in our knowledge. One which used the stores of heat and weak fusion to produce higher order and structure. Millions of years ago, intelligence evolved. The creatures of this system were far older than us. Their extreme differences made them more and less advanced than other life in the galaxy. Their technology was primitive, their mental reach into science and mathematics profound.

These thoughts befuddled my mind as our spacetime bubble approached the enormous planet. But any attempt to communicate with the aliens of Gyl had to wait. First, we needed to deal with the unexpected Dram welcoming party waiting for us.

Chapter 29

The doctrine that the world is made up of objects whose existence is independent of human consciousness turns out to be in conflict with quantum mechanics and with facts established by experiment.

Bernard d'Espagnat

"*Shit!*" Williams whistled. "There must be four or five squadrons."

"Over there!" said Moore, pointing to dark patches in the bright local star field. "Shadow ships. Half as many."

My stomach dropped. One Dram cruiser and a single of those devil boats were enough. This time, thirty starships hung between us and the planet. The balance of power in this standoff was much less clear to me.

"Gyl has no obvious strategic importance to this war," noted Waythrel. "We are here only because of the critical node point that rests next to their world."

"Someone's selling us out." Moore scowled. "They knew we were coming."

"Likely briefed about the last engagement," said Williams. "We chased off one of theirs before. Can we scare off ten of them?"

The case for the spy grew stronger. We didn't have the luxury to debate. I gazed at the line of starships, and my mind raced through stratagems, tactics, scenarios. But something was bothering me.

"Why aren't they engaging? Moving? They're just sitting there."

"Could be they haven't picked us up yet," said Williams.

Ambra's response was cold. "No. They're closing the noose."

I spun around. *An ambush!* Another twenty or thirty ships approached behind us. They were spreading out to the sides and above, shutting down all avenues of escape. Our enemies surrounded us, cutting us off from the Orb and the planet.

I turned to Ambra and placed my hand on her shoulder.

"You must do something soon," said Waythrel.

She smiled. "Silly Xix, you know both what and when are illusions."

With those words, she was gone.

We startled. One moment, I was touching my beloved with concern, the next I was holding air. As we gawked at one another in confusion, space was decorated with explosions of light.

Afterward, she'd explain to me what happened. At the time, a sudden, massive, and broad assault on the enemy vessels erupted. From every position. Those in front of us, nearest the planet. Those behind us. Those completing a sphere entombing us in a net of ships. From each location of a Dram and shadow entity, there came brilliance.

The Orb flashed, as bright as we had seen in the attack at Orferlin, but without the buildup. There was no time to observe the flaming arms of energy extend from the object. They simply appeared around us.

The carnage was spectacular. Replacing the spherical lattice of surrounding war boats, a fiery globe encased us. Our enemies were vaporized. The Anti craft exploded with the staggering energies of annihilation. Before we could process the destruction, a gargantuan cyclone was born in the midst of it. The hurricane of light and debris swirled down to a vortex as broad as a major moon. The tunnel of radiance extended back toward the Orb. The glorious sphere of power controlled by the Daughter lit up brighter than the local star.

We shielded our eyes, and I engaged my suit helmet. It fastened itself around my head, and I toggled the view screen to filter incoming radiation. I squinted at the glowing portal. The remains of enemy ships poured into the multidimensional gateway and disappeared.

The brilliance winked out. Its disappearance was like a silenced thunder. Relief swept over me.

"You cannot win a battle if you focus on winning space alone."

Ambra's voice. She stood in the middle of the enclosure, her face drawn, eyes bloodshot.

"The universe moves in more than three dimensions."

I opened the faceplate of my suit. I dashed to her and enveloped her body in my hard exoskeleton. The nanofiber gloves retracted. I could feel the softness of her flesh. After I had held her for a moment, I realized how terrified I had been at her disappearance. The irrational fear of losing her chilled me in repeating waves.

"Ambra, don't do that to me again, please," I blurted. My face pressed into her shoulder and neck. "I can't lose you. Not after finding you."

I will never be lost to you, Nitin. Even if it might seem so for a time. Like distance, time is an illusion.

"I'll be buggered!" said Moore. "That, all by itself, makes this trip worth whatever shit we're going to see."

Williams stared open-mouthed and said nothing. Waythrel walked to the middle of the bubble and positioned its odd body next to Ambra.

"Once again, our Daughter of Time teaches her teacher a lesson." If a Xix had a mouth, it would have been smiling.

I pulled back, holding her shoulders. Her skin felt cold. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Tired, Nitin. I'll sit." She lowered herself into a cross-legged position on the floor of the enclosure. She closed her eyes.

I knelt with her, continuing to hold her hands as she sat. I stroked her hair, drawing a soft smile from her lips.

"I wish I could sleep right now," she finished, resting her head on my shoulder.

"So are we going to get an explanation for this Dram navy Armageddon?" asked Williams.

"I can tell you and spare Ambra the energy," said Waythrel. "The simplest account is that, using the Orb, the Daughter can travel through both space and time. Such transit normally requires tremendous energies. Since we are in proximity to the Time Sphere, she didn't need to journey far in any dimension. She was able to access several distinct three-dimensional locations at a single time point."

My warrant officer cocked her head to one side. "Run it by me again."

"She accessed the identical temporal location repeatedly, but each repetition changing the position." I thought I heard a slight impatience in the alien's translator. Her words must have been the Xixian version of *Physics for Poets*.

"Went to different places, but all at the same time?" asked Moore, his brow furrowed.

Williams traced a circle with her finger. "Right. That's why we saw everything happening everywhere, but all at once."

"If you had better eyes," continued the alien, "you would have seen something stranger. Tens, hundreds of Ambra Dawns. Each positioned near the enemy ships and simultaneously inducing their destruction."

"Enough for now," sighed Ambra, touching my arm. She opened her eyes. "We need to see what's left of the Gyl for us to speak to. Speaking with them won't be easy." She rose and kissed my hands. "Walk with me, Nitin?"

I followed her to the edge of the enclosure. In the midst of this insanity, I found myself distracted, stunned by her beauty. Uncountable numbers of stars carpeted the background. The suns shone undiminished and without distortion through the space-time compartment. The dots of light framed her form, her red locks bouncing with each step. I was still reeling from the sudden disappearance. Her physical presence struck me as infinitely valuable, precious, and vulnerable. Had I understood our ultimate fates, I would have treasured this physicality all the more.

I am yours and you are mine, Nitin. In flesh and in spirit.

"I feel them," she spoke out loud to everyone. The rest drew near, hanging on her words. "You can't see them, but the entire planet is ringed with poisonous seeds."

"The death drones." I shuddered. The memory of those around Brax was still raw. I had to stop myself from turning toward the bodies of Kim and Fox.

"Yes, but the Anti have not achieved their goal here. Not yet."

"How do you know?" I asked.

Waythrel responded. "Because we can sense the mind of the Gyl below. It has not been destroyed."

I felt relief. "Then they're okay."

"No," said Ambra. "They're weakening. It'll be much slower

with them than with the Brax. I'll speak with them now, find out what I can. If we conclude it's safe, I'll purge these drones from the system."

Chapter 30

In the beginning, there were only probabilities. The universe could only come into existence if someone observed it. It does not matter that the observers turned up several billion years later. The universe exists because we are aware of it.

Martin Rees

Ambra parked the bubble outside the planetary atmosphere. The gas giant now spanned our field of vision. Churning cloud bands encircled the disk before us. Their hues ranged from blue to violet. Monstrous storms the size of entire worlds spun in tight knots at various locations. Seven major moons cast shadows on this face of the planet. My memory from the sharing told me there should be another five obscured from view. The number of minor satellites was in the hundreds.

The Gyl were beings with form composed of the planetary layers themselves. To enter too deep into the atmosphere was to violate their personal being in some sense. The substrates for their quasi-crystalline life were buried near the center of the gas giant.

But Ambra wished to cause no offense, and we hovered at the surface. The mind of the world was strange beyond prediction. She proceeded with extreme caution.

As on Orferlin, the members of my team and I wanted to partake in the communication. Readers on New Earth had spoken with these beings through the telepathic medium. While we could have shared as we did with Caga of the Brax, Waythrel warned it wouldn't be productive. It might be deadly.

"Cognitive-shock is probable," said the alien. "Between mentalities as similar as Xix and human, there can be disturbances in sharing. The thoughts of the Gyl are not isomorphous to those of creatures like us. A naked, naive encounter would lead to trauma. Only through the deepest meditations, employing the greater insight of the Group Mind, were we capable of establishing contact. Here, devoid of the horde of Readers, that collective does not exist. It may not be possible to communicate at all."

Ambra explained further. "If we do, we'll only be able to understand them because of those memories. The lessons we learned through the sharing will guide us." Her gaze was troubled. "You have none of that background. The presence of the Gyl consciousness could be dangerous. It could threaten your psyche in its terrible alienness."

"How can some crystal brain in there hurt mine out here?" asked Moore.

"The Daughter can kill with her thoughts, Sergeant," said Waythrel. "I've seen her drop entire Dram infantries to the ground without lifting her finger. Intelligence creates a physical potential. A Writer can modify that field. One spacetime array altering another. Those modifications can be beneficial, healing, educational. Or they can be destructive. The interaction of two extremely different mental entities is unpredictable. You are one small mind. Here is a planetary consciousness of proportions and a nature that would frighten you if you could perceive it."

Ambra agreed. “It will be dangerous for Waythrel and me, even with the power of the Orb. Because to communicate, I’ll have to open myself to them. Become vulnerable.”

“Are they potentially violent?” I asked.

She struggled to answer. “Could they damage me? Yes. Would it be violence? Is solar radiation burning your skin an attack or hostile? Or are these words suitable for creatures like us but not for other things in this universe?”

“Lost me, sister,” said Moore. “But I’m happy to stay out of this sharing. Wasn’t keen on the other one except I was tired of being left out.”

Williams agreed. “It sounds like too big a risk. Count me out.”

“There may be a way for you to partake of the conversation, although it will be strange,” said Waythrel.

Ambra frowned at the alien. “How?”

“The MECHcore suits,” it said. “There is an AI embedded within. It has scaled several levels of proto-sentience.”

She frowned, a pained expression on her face.

Warning lights went on for me. “What does this mean?”

“A spacetime field, Nitin. I Read and Write. I’ve interacted with the artificial intelligence of the more evolved systems the Xix have developed. Simple awareness. Ugly in many ways, but real. Growing more complex with their science, with each generation of the technology.”

“Before we left, the Daughter undertook extensive research efforts with our synthetic cognition,” said Waythrel. “She achieved remarkable results with the more advanced versions. However, our AI has progressed much further in consciousness than the primitive minds in your suits.”

“Is this bad?” I asked. Ambra’s face was strained. “You’re troubled.”

Now isn’t the time, Nitin. Trust me. I’ll explain everything later.

"No, it's not a problem at all," said Ambra. "It means our Xix is right. I can work through your mechs. I can funnel the fields of thought through them and the Xixian translator." She nodded, as if seeing the alien's plan come together in her mind. "Yes. Suit up, turn on your COM, and you'll hear their speech come through the speakers."

"Mangled as it might be by our understanding and Ambra's interface with the AI," completed Waythrel.

Moore laughed. "I swear everything that happens on this trip has got to be weirder than a peyote cactus ceremony."

"Cactus ceremony?" asked Williams, an eyebrow arched.

"Yeah, you know, American Indians? Mescaline?"

She shook her head and shrugged.

He grinned. "Forget it. Sounds wicked, sister. I'm onboard."

Williams consented. "Me, too."

"Okay, let's suit up." I grabbed for my headgear before remembering I had already put it on during the attack. I engaged the COM. "Ready whenever you are, Ambra."

She and Waythrel sat together in the middle of the bubble. The alien's long arms reached toward the Daughter. She held the many-fingered ends of the Xixian extremities and closed her eyes. They meditated in silence for more than thirty minutes. The enclosure was quiet except for the shallow breathing of the humans and the strange respirations of the Xix—a noise like some rhythmic steam leak from a radiator.

I knew there must be something transformative happening. Something amazing. The galaxy's greatest Reader. The Orb. A bizarre crystalline intelligence inhabiting a planet dominating my field of vision. The surrounding space should be shaking.

I sensed nothing. For the first time, I grasped the separation between Ambra and the rest of us. Here was the woman I loved. Earth's savior I had adored since my birth. The woman with whom I had shared flesh and heart and mind. In this place and

time, in this state, she was a creature divergent. A soul I couldn't reach or understand. I was blind in a sensory world where she had the greatest vision of all.

I felt much more than inadequate—I was alone. For the first time, I yearned, longed with a hungry desperation, to be able to share her journey.

I strained. I tried to activate some latent power within me. A sightless mole, I conjured organs of perception to pierce the darkness. If desire by itself could remake the fabric of the universe, I would have succeeded. Of course, it was laughable. The darkness endured, and all I managed to do was give myself a tension headache. Ambra and Waythrel remained in a realm I couldn't access—would never experience. The realization brought a weight of sadness on me.

As I waited with a new burden on my heart, our COM units crackled. Static bursts and garbled noises. Words.

The voice of Gyl.

Chapter 31

Within the narrow spectrum of our senses, we are blind to the cosmic symphony that plays on frequencies beyond our grasp.

Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer 3.5,
January 6, 2024

"*We are the having been becoming to the invader uncreation deathling approach reaching hydrogen oxygen carbon netting summation of the broken crystal core.*"

The genderless voice of the AI ceased, leaving static flowing over the COM. I glanced at our pair of Readers—they remained motionless in their deep meditation. I locked eyes with my soldiers.

Moore shook his head. "Well, that's gone pear-shaped."

We didn't have any chance to consider the opening greeting. The conversation continued.

"We are a seed of the Sol Mind, the seven-kilo parsec three-dimensioned pathway."

This came through the Xix's translator, but not in the alien's typical tones. Some combination of the thoughts of Ambra and the Xix, perhaps. A warped phrase relayed through the cybernetic linkage between their minds and the equipment. The response in our COMs was stranger.

"*The nucleation event corrected being devoid of augmentation. Understanding through other complexities passes inside solvent channels*."

"Other pathways are closed," rang out Waythrel's device. "Paths must be taken. Gyl dissolves."

"*Gyl dissolves*."

"Well, I'm glad we've established *that*," said Williams, rolling her eyes. "We should have sat this conversation out. Makes no sense."

Moore shrugged. "It's like listening to a malfunctioning translator."

"Then switch off and shut up," I snapped. "I want to hear this!"

"...with the time infinite crowd-mind gate. Gyl lacks the interference projections to unmake the dissolving."

"*Carbon crystal seeds dissolve upon breaching radial separations."*

"We maintain safe distances."

"*Acceleration achieving possible state spaces augmentation is the lattice drivings the asymmetry breaking."*

A long pause followed this statement. Several minutes passed. Moore and Williams paced the bubble and conversed. I ignored them.

My beloved struggled. I studied her lined face. Tension flared through her muscles. Her pale skin was tight over veins bulging from internal pressure. Stress was building up within her at whatever had been said or at her efforts to parse it.

"Yes. The disorder is comprehended," came a response. "Reversal of molecular organization."

"*Surface defects in the framework only are your thoughts failing assembly of divergent structural integrations. Maximum extensionings through all available states to render the end the beginning sameness.*"

Ambra's back stiffened. "Symmetry broken."

"*The final first through crystal will was now always healed wounding killing all matrices built from broken order. Earth shards prolong Gyl thankfulness anxiety universal erasure.*"

"We understand."

Moore coughed. "Yeah, sure cleared it up."

I placed my finger over my mouth. Williams shrugged her shoulders, rolling her eyes.

The translator spoke a last statement. "The asymmetrical induction will be halted."

The rest was static. After five minutes of it, we shut off our COMs. The two Readers still didn't move, and we waited in anticipation until Ambra stirred. Her eyes slid open like someone drugged.

"Waythrel?" she whispered.

The Xix didn't respond. She rested her hands on the midsection of the creature, the location of the Xixian brain-like structure.

"Come back. Hear me. Follow my voice."

She sat in this position, unmoving, repeating the commands to the alien. Her expression pained and concerned, she called the creature's name. Minutes passed. An hour.

"Not looking good," said Moore under his breath. "Maybe the Gyl-thing lobotomized the squid. If it's possible with one of those things."

I dared not interfere. Time dragged without a sound other than Ambra's repeated calls. Her speech quieted, her eyes peering past us, as if her mind were traveling some vast distance.

After the extended ministrations, which the rest of us had begun to assume were in vain, Waythrel stirred. And promptly fell over on its side, unmoving.

"Ambra! What happened?" I leaped across the bubble and crouched down, trying to lift the alien. Despite the hydraulics of my suit, the creature was a struggle to move.

"Easy, Nitin," she said. "The worst has passed. Waythrel's in a recovery state unique to its kind. We won't get a response for a few hours. You can let the body be—no need to hold it up."

I lowered the Xix back to the surface of the enclosure. The bright and dense star field glimmered at me, surrounding its shape. Having no exobiology training, I couldn't tell whether it lived.

"Then how do you know it's okay?" asked Williams, both she and Moore gathered alongside the prone extraterrestrial.

Ambra leaned forward, cupping her face in her palms. The enormous bulge from her skull protruded from the tips of her fingers. The veins were swollen and taut. Her nails clung like hooks on a mask surrounded by a red halo.

Her words came out muffled. "We could connect mentally. Only at the end." She massaged her temples a moment and placed her hands on the ground behind her for support. "Waythrel's mind became detached. The Gyl mental field broke the connection to its physical spacetime incarnation. I had to reintegrate them. Some damage occurred, but it's hard for me to know exactly what. Xix minds are too complex for me."

"Damage?" I asked. "Permanent? Memory? Cognitive function? What?"

"I said I don't know, Nitin!"

I recoiled, never having been the object of her anger.

Her face softened, and she reached out and took my hand. "I'm sorry. This has been extremely difficult. This whole damn day. We'll have to wait and see."

She stood and stretched her arms, bending her body in

different yoga positions. Waythrel remained unmoving on the floor. The MECHcore soldiers glanced between Ambra and me.

The Brit cursed and rose as well. "So while we're kicking our heels, let's have you fill us in on that chinwag. Because from where we're standing, it was a wad of rubbish."

She sighed. "We told you it would be hard to understand. What we experienced in the direct communication was far more difficult."

Williams probed further. "It sounded like you learned something important at the end. You were going to destroy the drones or something."

"Yes," she said. "On the last part, it's easy to explain. The Gyl are unable to remove them and were happy for us to do so. It will save them. They explained to us about the devices. What they perceived was happening to them, to the planet—it was something very disturbing. If we have actually understood it correctly."

The strange words kept floating through my mind. "Something about fixing *broken symmetries* and *achieving all states*. What did it mean?"

She turned around to face us, her expression dark. "The Anti aren't allies of the Dram, whatever the bugs think. They're enemies of everything in this galaxy. In fact, of all the known galaxies. Of all the matter existing in the universe."

Moore huffed. "How do you wage war on the universe? And why?"

"I don't know." Her voice was heavy. "These devices are a clue. The first real information about what's happening. I'm anxious now to reach Hola, our last node. There, we may be able to examine the effects of the drones. There we have a species at least *slightly* more comprehensible than the Gyl. Assuming the Anti have placed the evil things there as well." She stared out into the surrounding star field. "I've a feeling they have."

"So what do they *do*?" asked Moore.

"Entropy. A weaponized application."

"You mean like the second law of thermodynamics?" asked Williams. "Everything becomes disordered?"

"Yes, but *disorder* is a loaded, human word. Matter and energy moving to greater *freedom* might be a more insightful phrase, but Waythrel is the better one to talk to. I'm no physicist, and the physics of New Earth is primitive compared to the Xix." She inhaled, preparing her words. "Entropy is why, when you have organization, it *dis*organizes over time. Why you have to keep cleaning your room, but it never needs to be messed up. Why, when you pop a balloon full of helium, it mixes with all the other gases in the room, doesn't stay separated. Why things break down. Why energy transfer is always with a loss. All possible states are accessed."

She raised herself from the invisible floor and stared down at the alien.

"It's why time appears to flow in one direction. Space, time, order, disorder, freedoms, constraints—they're all tied together in a deep sense. The ultimate nature of reality is like a harmony whose quality depends on the notes sounded by each of these elements."

I had no idea what she was talking about. "So, if the drones increase entropy, stuff breaks down more quickly."

"In some ways," she said, glancing at the wrecked remains of my team. "At a terrible rate unimaginable until now. The Gyl understood it best because of their highly structured crystalline composition. They possess a unique perspective, as well as physical form in our galaxy."

"One the things are breaking down now, right?" asked Williams.

"Yes," replied Ambra, wincing at my warrant officer as if receiving a reprimand. "So the time for talk is over. We have some orbiting antimatter to destroy."

Chapter 32

The total disorder in the universe, as measured by the quantity that physicists call entropy, increases steadily over time. Also, the total order in the universe, as measured by the complexity and permanence of organized structures, also increases steadily over time.

Freeman Dyson

Destroy them, she did.

Three hundred were stationed across the surface of the planet, orbiting outside the atmosphere. We approached them one at a time. Ambra summoned the full power of the Orbs to grant us maximum protection. She crushed the devices by warping space around them. The drones didn't retaliate or mount any response. Perhaps the Anti had never encountered anyone who could attack the objects. Or it happened too quickly for any useful information to be transmitted.

Whatever the reason, the effect was dramatic. After she squashed them, their shielding failed. As they made contact with

the edges of the Gyl atmosphere, a light show erupted. The low-density gases contacted the pulverized antimatter. A glow grew. Gravity drove the drone carcasses faster into the planet. Explosions resembling epic thermonuclear blasts detonated. Not enough to be a problem for a world this size but producing gigantic pageantry.

Three hundred was a terrifying number. After encountering many of the targets, she began to sense their locations, detecting them by the strange effects they had on spacetime. It became clear the Anti had placed them equidistant around the gas giant.

With their geometry mapped, she summoned a tidal wave of power from the Orb. In a burst of flame, she hit all the drones with a blast of energy. Once again, a titanic vortex in space formed and drank down the refuse of her wrath.

After this fireworks display, the Xix woke. A stirring in the eyestalks was the first sign. The individual eyes pointed in many directions, surveying the surroundings. Ambra knelt down beside the alien and held its odd arm.

"Waythrel," she said.

The alien's voice stammered in monotone. "We are about Gyl. I have been injured. Deductions suggest that you have destroyed the Anti devices. I have no memory of such a conversation, or any communion, with their mind. The contact must have overwhelmed me."

Its legs moved at bizarre angles. In a miracle of biomechanics, the extraterrestrial raised itself to a standing position.

"Yes, the drones are annihilated," said Ambra. "The planet is free of their poison. You were displaced. I did my best to help. I'm sorry for where I failed."

"We will have to see how much you have failed," it said, the

tones from the translator more fluid and coherent. "I know you did all you could. I understood the risks."

"There are important things to know about the communion," she said. "Ideas too complicated for me to explain. Can you share?"

The Xix reached out for her hands. "Yes, but go slowly, Daughter of Time."

Once again, we waited in silence as the Readers functioned in a realm inaccessible to us. It was much shorter than the interaction with Gyl. After five minutes, they separated.

"Frightening information," said Waythrel. The alien began a strange pacing inside the enclosure.

"I'm not sure I have understood it correctly," responded Ambra.

"Perhaps not, and I cannot access my memories to compare. Like you noted, however, we can test the creatures at Hola. We also have the suspended remains of the MECHcore team of Captain Ratava. There may be critical evidence there that scientific equipment can detect."

It was disturbing to hear the Xix refer to the butchered forms of two of my crew in such clinical terms. But I knew the alien was right. The hideous tools of the Anti had already stolen their dignity. If we could learn something about their weapons by examining their bodies, they'd not have died in vain.

"We're finished here," said Ambra. "We need to seal the node and continue to Hola. This time, I'll make sure we arrive early."

"Early?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"The Time Tree lattice places all the star systems with Orbs on a synchronized clock," said Waythrel. Damage or no, the alien's wits appeared intact. "A time frame relative to the rest of the galaxy but absolute within the member worlds. She doesn't want any more surprises."

Seeing our confused expressions, Ambra explained further.

"We have to assume our plans were leaked. Our enemies expect us to go to Hola. Because they're limited to the String routes, they can only move forward or beside us in time."

"They may be waiting now, having set up a trap days or weeks ago when the spy first betrayed our mission," continued the alien. "But not months before. If we travel far enough into the past, after they took the node, but in advance of forming our preparations, they cannot ambush us."

"Aye, yeah, but there's a wee hole in all that," said Moore. "What if it's one of us blokes who's the traitor, eh? Then they'll ring up the Dram, and the bugs will adjust their schedule."

"They can't go back in time that way," said Williams.

"Why not?"

She's clicked her tongue. "Have you forgotten all your basic training? The Strings the Readers navigate on connect physical points, *but at the same time.* It's what she means by a clock. If we go back in time, they can't do anything."

"She is correct," said Waythrel. "The Daughter alone, who possesses unique access to the dimensional doorways in the Celestial Sphere, can do so. Not even the False Dawns have yet opened an Orb—as far as we know. If we go earlier, we'll be less likely to find unpleasant visitors."

As usual, these discussions brought on a headache. But I had to ask.

"You said there was a clone army. That it came from many points in the future. So the clones *can* cross through time. So why can't the traitor tell them and they still set a trap?"

"Can the spy communicate through time to those False Dawns?" Williams shared my struggles and rubbed her temples. "God, this is confusing."

"We don't know about the mole," said the Xix. "It would not likely matter. They do not use the Orbs. They travel through their own wormholes. It takes tremendous energy. They must be

precise, mapping in space and time carefully. It is unlikely such a coordinated plot can be arranged on short notice with armies from a distant era.

"So the traitor—if he or she exists," said Moore, eyeing us with a smirk, "will just have to stew in it."

"Yes," said Ambra. "I'll pick a time before our plans, but we still don't know what might be waiting. Probably nothing, but perhaps the whole Dram armada." She raised her palms up. "So, what will it be?"

"Bloody life through action!" he said with a fist pump. "Let's go back in time, baby!"

"Fine with me," said Williams. "Long as we don't have to talk to any more crystal minds. The Hola, wait, I remember—they're primitive, right? Low-level intelligence, so no talking at all?"

Waythrel answered. "Communication will not be fruitful. Mental monitoring will be. They are a hive mentality. The structure of that mind was studied in detail by a Xixian scientist hundreds of years ago."

I remembered. "They were in the sharing. I didn't understand the analysis."

"Me either," echoed Moore.

"We will discuss it further," said the alien. "The current collective consciousness can be analyzed and compared to the data from before. If the Anti devices increase disorder, there will be measurable effects. A signature, if you will. It will be important proof of this hypothesis."

"If Ambra's right?" I asked.

The eyestalks danced around. "Then we should be afraid, Captain."

Chapter 33

In all the laws of physics that we have found so far, there does not seem to be any distinction between the past and the future. The moving picture should work the same going both ways, and the physicist who looks at it should not laugh.

Richard Feynman

Once again, Ambra stood before the Orb and sealed the node. It was something I had to assume was happening. I couldn't see the Strings. I was no Reader, and her efforts left no visible change in the Time Sphere I could perceive. As with so much surpassing my understanding during this mission, I'd have to get used to being in the dark.

We departed Gyl through the portal, and again I was racked with pains, losing consciousness. To my continued embarrassment, I was the sole traveler affected. The faded outlines of a disturbing dream ate at my subconscious, but I suppressed the experience to focus on the tasks at hand.

Prone, I didn't feel like rising. I mustered my strength, denied

the presence of the nausea and headache, and declared myself able to continue the mission. Ambra gave me a long side-eye but said nothing. I considered it a win to maintain my composure and avoid fainting for the first few hours.

Another gas giant waited in front of us. The knowledge learned in the sharing poured through my mind. Astronomers on Old Earth first cataloged extrasolar planets several hundred years ago. Those interested in extraterrestrial life faced disappointment. Most systems did not possess small, rocky, water-covered Edens like our own.

Instead, the predominant galactic citizens were of the Jovian type. Some spun this to believe moons around the great globes supported life as they imagined it. This indeed is the case in hundreds of locations. Much more common, however, is that the failed stars themselves harbored life, organisms diverging from the limited imaginations of early scientists.

The radiant orange Hola was a member of this plentiful set of worlds. The circumference was about twice the size of Jupiter, but smaller than the enormity of Gyl. Yet for a creature of New Earth, it was gigantic. While seventy satellites circled the world, none of them spawned life. The creatures in this star system filled the upper atmosphere of the gas giant.

We approached, and Ambra announced she had detected the death drones. As before, they were positioned across the surface of the planet, doing their dirty work. So Waythrel's experiment was on. We would examine the life of Hola for any evidence of "entropic acceleration." We would destroy the devices and seal the final node.

Maintaining our location in a manner to minimize the effects of the Anti weapons, we descended into the top layers. Beautiful cloud formations organized into architectural structures. They were titanic and multilayered, mountains carved from the vapors. Light dimmed as we penetrated. Soon we passed a distance several

times the depth of New Earth's paper-thin atmosphere. It was here we saw signs of life.

Our first contact with living beings wasn't with the Holans. Instead, we encountered the more primitive cloud-hoppers of this Jovian zoo. Giant gasbags, animated airships floated in the upper layers. They maneuvered by controlling the mixture of hydrogen and helium within them, as well as the temperature of the gases. More H_2 or heat meant they rose. More He or colder vapors, and they descended.

Like everything about this world, the creatures were colossal. Kilometers long, they resembled ellipsoidal jellyfish. Projections extended from their surfaces like towering cilia. A complicated internal anatomy peeked through the translucent outer membrane.

Millions of these titanic islands scampered across the skies. Many darted with surprising speed in different directions. Wandering through this biolayer, my eyes discerned subtle differences between organisms that first appeared identical. Hundreds of distinct balloon species mixed together in the air. Predators sought prey, chasing them through the clouds. Others moved in what I imagined to be herds. It was all mesmerizing. I was a child at a zoo for the first time. I could stare through the invisible barrier and watch them dance all day.

"Amazing, aren't they?" asked Ambra, smiling at me.

"Yes. They're beautiful," I said.

"Creepy as hell," said Williams, shivering with a chill. "Sorry, I'm sure there's all kinds of astrobiology fun here. But these things are right out of some of my nightmares as a kid."

"Wait, you had dreams of continent-sized floating gas bags?" smirked Moore.

"Not exactly, smartass," she said. Her glare was icy. "Close enough."

"I just had dreams of bonking the mail girl."

She rolled her eyes. "Not surprised."

"Where are the Holans?" I asked.

The Xix answered. "They are the most developed species on Hola, but their numbers to date are low. Xixian scientists hypothesized that, in several hundred thousand years, they could develop a technological civilization. Fill the skies. For now, Ambra will have to find them by homing in on their sentient signal."

"Okay, Waythrel," she said with a frown. "It was nice to relax a bit. But point taken."

For the next hour or so, she sat in her meditative position in a deep trance. For extended periods, the bubble idled as the rest of us paced. We watched the bizarre animals outside or discussed our fears of the war. The Xix remained quiet, its internal processes a mystery. Periodically, the enclosure would move. We'd accelerate in some direction and slow, coming to a stop. This occurred five or six times. After a few instances, we assumed it was finding a "scent" but losing it.

Eventually, we accelerated again, and this time didn't decelerate for some time. Williams and Moore headed toward the front of the capsule. We hurtled through giant cloud formations. The panorama was breathtaking. I understood how Ambra felt. It would have been wondrous to let go of the pressing dangers of our mission and enjoy this journey through Hola. I found something soothing about the endless airscape and the roaming herds of dirigible life. The orange light filling the space of this atmospheric layer was warm and calming.

Ambra stood, moving beside the two members of my team. I followed her, staring over her head toward the rising star of the system. It would be early morning in this portion of the planet, whatever that meant here. Ahead, a distinct mass hung, different from the other life-forms we'd encountered. To begin, it was small, black, and discontinuous. It drifted at odds to the prevailing currents.

The cloud was our destination. We approached, and the partly solid nature disintegrated. What had been a continuous membrane dissolved into thousands of smaller entities. The individual objects were tiny relative to the lumbering air beasts. They were also much faster. Individuals darted here and there, but as a group, they maintained a structured whole.

"Reminds me of a flock of birds," I said.

"Or a school of minnows," replied Williams.

"Or a bunch of angry hornets," said Moore.

Ambra laughed. We smiled.

The hornets attacked.

Chapter 34

The second law of thermodynamics is, without a doubt, one of the most perfect laws in physics. Not even Maxwell's laws of electricity or Newton's law of gravitation are so sacrosanct, for each has measurable corrections coming from quantum effects or general relativity. The law has caught the attention of poets and philosophers and has been called the greatest scientific achievement of the nineteenth century.

Ivan P. Bazarov

Protected within Ambra's spacetime field, we were never in any real danger. It was still disconcerting, as tens of thousands of angry Holans threw themselves at our enclosure. Their efforts achieved nothing, but it was thrilling to watch. The cloud grew appendages, arms and hands extending toward us. They grabbed and battered at this new threat.

"Notice the coordinated projections," said Waythrel, as if the alien had read my mind. "They are a hive-structure. The simpler

separate members of the group work in unison to create a much greater whole. The collective functions as a super-individual. It is far more intelligent and capable than the units or smaller organizational groups. When the mass has enough constituents, a threshold, and those components have worked together for decades, diversifying, harmonizing, the colony steps into this transformative consciousness."

I remembered some of this from the sharing. It was like a developing human with our larger brains. We have billions of neurons cooperating. It takes us years of interacting with the world and being taught to function at the levels of adults. I made the point to the group.

"So also with the Xix," added Waythrel to my comments. "For life-forms with substantial cognitive clusters, singletons can achieve a higher level of function, independently. Of course, realizing the full potential of the individual requires a broader social construct. A *culture*. The Holans cannot attain the mentality you see before you today unless they have many constituents. The singular intellects are far simpler."

"So it's like a bunch of dumb bees together getting smarter when they're part of a colony?" asked Moore.

"Similar," said the alien. "The Holan individuals are further developed than your isolated insects. Therefore, their intelligence in the swarm-state is correspondingly greater."

"So, hive mind. Got it. What's the plan then?" asked Williams. "How do we know if the drones are messing with them?"

"We'll monitor their minds," said Ambra.

The extraterrestrial chirped as it bounced around our cabin. "I have within my species-memory the patterns of their cognitive-forms. Readers who researched Hola years before took scans. The Daughter and I will compare what we see now and examine the evidence for drone effects."

In this manner, we spent the next five days. Chasing conscious clouds, our Reader pair entered their trances and probed the swarms. The process was arduous, the hive-thoughts difficult to understand. At least they posed far less danger than the efforts at Gyl.

Always when they woke from their meditations, it was with sadness. Each of the colonies we encountered showed signs of a terrible mental deterioration. Proximity to the drones increased the decay. It didn't take long for the pattern to be incontrovertible. The Holan intelligences were dying.

"They had been on the cusp of an organized culture," pined Waythrel after one grueling session. "The Xixian reports detailed the progress of the hives hundreds of years ago. Rudimentary versions of social structure and generational learning had taken root. In a manner simpler and yet different from our technological civilization. They had begun to fashion advanced cultural building blocks. Now, they have been set back millennia. At the rate of decay we are witnessing, in several decades they will begin to lose hive integrity."

"What are these terrible drones?" I asked, revolted by the destruction they were describing.

"The deeper purpose is unclear," continued the alien. "This confirms the entropic manipulation, however. The anti-order. The damage strikes the higher-level sentient structures first. It extends through many orders of complexity. The Gyl uncovered evidence of effects on chemistry and atomic physics."

"Atomic physics?" asked Williams. "You mean like atoms falling apart?"

"We don't know," said Ambra. "The Gyl were hard to understand."

"We know enough now to move on," said the Xix. "With the information in hand, we might develop countermeasures to the pro-entropic fields."

"So, that's it?" said Moore. "Mission accomplished, and we bug out of here?"

"Yes," she said, standing up from her crossed-legged position. "First, we destroy these drones. Then we seal the third and final node and cut off New Earth from the Dram."

"And return to plan the next stage in this conflict," concluded Waythrel.

So it would have gone, likely to far less sorrow and loss, if we had simply left a day earlier. Such are the random chances in time. So proceeds the cosmic play along paths often seeming more capricious than caring.

Ambra removed the Anti devices. We abandoned the decorative atmosphere of Hola, and Ambra set course for the Time Sphere. It was strange to think this mad mission was coming to an end. We would soon be walking on the sands of New Earth again.

I dreaded the transit through the Orb and was developing a phobia of the journeys. But I could muster courage for a last trip. Satisfaction from achieving a critical goal in protecting our homeworld was a compelling motivator. Beyond our homeward, we were shielding thousands of star systems vulnerable to invasion. I knew Fox and Kim would have considered their sacrifice worth it. That was why they had joined in the first place. They had lived, and died, through action, incarnating our motto in their legacy to the galaxy.

As the Orb grew in size before our approaching bubble, light flashed beside it. I immediately recognized both the phenomenon and the object materializing. Adrenaline coursed through my system. My heart raced.

A Dram warboat surfed off the Time Tree. It materialized on top of us.

In the end, despite my reaction, it wouldn't pose a risk to us in and of itself. Ambra would disable it. She'd also exploit a useful opportunity to interrogate its crew.

What we learned would set in motion a series of events leading to trauma and tragedy.

Chapter 35

Let us draw an arrow arbitrarily. If, as we follow the arrow, we find more and more of the random element in the state of the world, then the arrow is pointing towards the future; if the random element decreases, the arrow points towards the past. I shall use the phrase 'time's arrow' to express this one-way property of time which has no analogue in space.

Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington

"We got guests," said Moore.

The warship didn't waste time with pleasantries. Short moments passed as the Dram deciphered the odd floating travelers on their monitors. Unable to do anything but verify the composition of our party, they did what they do best. They opened fire.

This surely elicited a second, deeper round of confusion in the enemy vessel. Highly shielded Xixian starships collapsed under the focused firepower of their military. Here were four individuals with a strange cargo, housed in some transparent craft. They stood

before the bulk of one of their most feared battle cruisers and took the full fury of their assault.

Ambra didn't give them much time to seek a more analytic mode. She steered the bubble toward the cruiser. Beam weapons and missiles deflected away from us. She parked it outside the hull.

"Time to talk to some bugs," she said.

Unlike our entrance to the Braxian starship, she didn't spare their construction. The ship's walls bent inward, the metal buckling as she forced her way in. Like on Brax, an extension from our enclosure projected forward. We invaded the belly of the warboat.

Air didn't rush out of the breach. She must have sealed off the ship as much as she shaped a tunnel of nothing for us to walk down. Since the Dram breathed atmosphere similar to ours, it would have been simpler to exit the bubble to engage them. Welcoming us with their usual hospitality, the insectile monsters attacked the moment we entered. I understood the usefulness of the protective capsid in an up-close and personal manner.

The engagement was surreal. The bugs threw everything they had at us short of blowing up the entire boat. Williams cautioned they might try that, remembering what had happened around Brax.

Waythrel disagreed. "It was the Anti craft that destroyed them. Dram culture disdains suicide and will always fight to their own or their opponent's death."

"If a shadow ship comes into the system?" I asked. "Then what? We don't know what their plans were for Hola."

"I'm monitoring the Orb. We'll know," said Ambra. "In the meantime, I've shut down their ship's ability to navigate or send external communications. They're paralyzed. Cut off from everything."

Moore laughed. "I do like this new way of fighting."

We continued to watch the fireworks. We had overcome our instinctual concern about warriors unloading their weapons

centimeters from us. The scene became comical. The bugs scampered around the membrane of emptiness. It was like driving a stick into an ant hole.

Ambra sat cross-legged before the mayhem. The enemy crew scurried in front, with the starlit backdrop and Hola behind. From all appearances, nothing existed between her and the attacking aliens. Recognizing the Daughter, their soldiers were eager to grab or kill her. With their razored hands and firearms, they tried. She ignored the crazed efforts.

After minutes of frenzied failure, the insects calmed and studied the phenomenon. They silenced the weapons. We were surrounded by a semicircle of exhausted and confused bugs. Several smaller Dram approached the area near the breach. They brought instruments and set them around us. *Scientists*, I assumed. Eventually, figures with considerable authority entered the chamber. They argued with the others. I could hear their interminable clicking speech.

The Xix spoke. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, this one will do," she said, shutting her eyes.

The soldier was inside our bubble, the transition undetectable. Warriors resumed darting about and added enclosure banging to their toolbox. The officer lunged toward Ambra. She held up her palm, and the creature froze, paralyzed.

"Allow me released or there falls destruction overall complete!" it shrieked through their horrid translators.

"Waythrel, would you like to start?"

The two aliens couldn't have been more different in mentality or appearance. The tribal, warlike Dram. The peaceful and contemplative Xix. A superficial similarity in size was the only overlap. The insect-like frame towering next to us matched the bulk and height of the Xixian Reader.

"The devices you plant around the worlds—what is their purpose?"

The leader said nothing. Its many legs twitched in anxiety within Ambra's web.

"We know they are destroying the minds and societies present. This is not of your doing. You preserve function. You destroy in combat, with honor, or enslave. What has changed? Who controls you and why?"

"We never to be withheld," it spat.

"Why are you placing these drones for others?"

It clammed up again.

Moore shook his head and folded his hands over his chest. "Fucker isn't going to talk. What if we start ripping segments off its exoskeleton?"

"I'm afraid he's right," said Waythrel. "We will need another probe." Several of the eyestalks flipped over toward the Brit. "One not involving torture."

Ambra sighed. "Mental probes are at best unpleasant. Being within the mind of a Dram still brings bad memories." She glared at the bug. "Listen to me. You know who I am. If you do not answer our questions, I will enter your thoughts and take those answers from you. Is this what you wish?"

The officer floundered in place, straining against invisible bonds. Outside, the creatures had returned to a frantic mode. They fired at us. One detonated an explosive device, killing several of their crew. We remained unharmed.

Ambra lowered her head. The creature stiffened, its purposeful movements subdued. She had reached within it in some profound way. The warriors paused in a curiosity that got the better of them.

"Fogged light ships usurp and control," came the strange words from the Dramian translator. "The appearance from nothing to something in zero. Burnings provide us with the right, as we know it. Performance in the war. The power of life. Shadow promises triumph."

"The Anti," said Williams.

The insect's sounds lowered to abortive attempts at clicking. Ambra remained focused as minutes dragged by.

The captive slumped backward and collapsed to the ground. It lay outside the enclosure. The horde of soldiers hauled the immobile body out of our sight.

She opened her eyes, and I saw a fire in them. "We need to go to Dram."

We snapped our heads toward her. Waythrel's eyestalks twitched.

"We can't go to Dram," I said. The idea was suicide.

"We can and we must," she said, standing and pacing.

"What did you see in its mind?" asked the Xix.

"Slavery. They're no longer in control of their own destiny. The Anti have taken over."

Moore scoffed. "So what? Serves the bugs right. Let 'em rot."

She ignored him. "The entire world is transformed. Factory centers proliferate, populations displaced. Manufacturing cities have sprung up from the wastelands of the planet."

"So these drones, the growing armada—it's all built on Dram for the war?"

"Beyond anything we could have imagined. There are clones. Thousands of them. They're building something enormous. A long-term industry."

Waythrel stepped forward. "A work with the Anti that will proceed far into the future."

Her shoulders slumped as she stared at the alien. "We were right."

Many eyestalks turned to the rest of us. "She may have a point. A reconnaissance mission. Given what I have heard, there is important information to be gleaned."

"How do you suppose we're going to do this?" asked Williams. "Waltz onto their homeworld and start taking holos?

Won't the entire planet and their new shadow friends have something to say about that?"

"Yes, they would. But they won't see us." Ambra winked. "Watch!"

The bugs outside our enclosure startled. Their heads darted around in a panic. Several raced toward us and crashed into nothing.

"We're invisible." I gawked.

"I can block various forms of matter from reaching us here, and I can change the path of photons. I can make it appear like nothing is inside."

Moore placed his hands on his hips. "Might have been useful earlier, sister, you think?"

She shook her head. "It leaves us vulnerable." The Dram were aware of our presence again. She gestured at the soldiers. "They could have shot us. Blurring where and what we are prevents me from maintaining the structure for a shield. We didn't know exactly what we'd face before. Now we do."

He continued. "So, you do your magic cloak act. We transport to Termite Land. Have a look-see, find out what they're up to, and get the hell out?"

"My plan, yes," said Ambra. "The more I think about it, the more it makes sense. We've come across disturbing things on this mission we don't understand. Now I know where the Anti are hiding. It's on Dram, and they're planning something huge. We add one more stop on the trip. The most important one."

It was logical. Risky, but the payoff could be high.

I turned to my team. "Waythrel's onboard, it seems. Me too."

"I'm not sure how I'm going to keep myself from opening fire on those bastards," said Moore. "I've watched too many soldiers killed by the bugs." He frowned. "Okay. I'm there. I wouldn't mind standing under their antenna and pulling out their dearest secrets. After that, their guts."

"I had to see this to believe it," Williams said, gesturing to the scene. "It's starting to be my new normal. Never thought I'd set foot on that damn planet."

"I was there once, centuries ago," said Ambra. Her face was lined. "It isn't something I do again lightly."

The enclosure separated from the Dram craft. They fired on us again. Ambra sighed, squeezing her hands into fists. The titanic war boat buckled in multiple locations, collapsing on itself. Bright detonations erupted, ripping the structure apart.

"Well, no reports back to the homeworld," chuckled Moore.

"Let us finish this mission and seal the last node," said Waythrel. "Afterward, we plot an unexpected course."

"For the Dram homeworld," I said, shaking my head as we sped toward the Orb.

Gazing at the quiescent portal, dread grew within me. The Time Sphere seemed altered. Of course, it wasn't. Objectively, it had the same appearance I had always seen—a grayness not exactly black, a reflection not exactly true, a hidden depth that couldn't quite be perceived.

Something *felt* different. My paranoid mind intuited emotion from the thing.

Hostility.

Chapter 36

The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars
Did wander darkling in the eternal space.

George Gordon Byron

The last trip hit me the hardest.

First, a terrible torture. Pain assaulted my body, my mind. Nausea poisoned me the moment we entered the Orb. A splitting headache pursued the stomach-churning sickness.

I fell to the floor of the enclosure, grabbing my head between my hands. I screamed. It was pure reflex to the extreme pain, but no less humiliating.

I lost consciousness——or that is how I understood it. A coma or some trance. Insight was denied.

In my nightmarish awareness, the group was gone. No bubble. No tunnel. No water. No shapes or stars or disembodied green eyes.

Only a devil Ambra. A demon child.

Once more, I lay in a field of maize. An impact had flattened the stalks into a broad ring. I occupied the center, my skull swimming, my bones aching. The sky cut as a sharpened sapphire.

Laughter popped over the corn. Hopping on a murmuring breeze, giggles spun my groggy head. A child's laugh, high-pitched, playful, without guile or cynicism. *Pure*.

Cornstalks rustled. I turned, seasick with the motion. A little girl, perhaps eight years old, bounced into the circle.

It was Ambra, yet it was not.

Her locks were scarlet and sweeping. Hideous machineries plunged in and sprang out of bald patches, scarring her skull. Like the Frankenstein monster in the Sahara, she was flesh and machine, natural and artificial. Enhanced. Degraded. *Altered.*

The cyborg paused and peered at me, smiled, and skipped around the outside of the corn ring. Her hands slapped the upright stalks to the rhythm of a song she hummed. I didn't know the tune. The strange melody unsettled me with its odd scales and frustrating resolutions. I shuddered at an unhealthy inversion of all familiar musical rules.

I fought to follow her as she danced, but I couldn't move my head fast enough to track her movements. I tasted bile as nausea bubbled through my guts.

I struggled to rise. My attempt ended with my head and shoulders slamming to the ground. The headache returned, blinding me, and I had to squint into the bright blue.

The girl stood over me. Her fiery tresses dangled like limbs from a combusting willow. The tips of her hairs brushed my face. I studied the enormous expansion of her skull where the tumor lay. The vile tubes and wires gleamed. Her eyes glowed green.

"I'll have to take it," the child-thing chirped.

I rubbed my eyes and tried to clear my head.

Take what?

"It's all part of a bigger plan. All the gods, they always have

their *bigger* plans. *She* can't know, of course. She's not ready. She won't be for a long time. I'm afraid she'll resist."

I struggled to rise again, moving with deliberation, but the effort was too much.

"Do you want a hand?" the devil girl asked, cocking her head to one side. She offered an arm.

I didn't know whether to trust her, but I was helpless. She could have harmed me already. That she hadn't gave me a small amount of confidence. I reached out.

"It's safe. I'm walled off from you."

Walled off?

I grasped the hand and with her help rose to a sit. Her skin slid over mine, strangely slick and smooth. "I think I'll stop here for now," I said as the pain returned.

"The right idea," she said. "You fell hard."

"Fell? Where am I? How did I get here?"

The clone arched her neck to the sky, bending her glance to the horizon, searching. "She brought you, but *why* is the riddle." She shook her head and shrugged.

"Who brought me?"

"The answers won't make sense. Words won't help much. In the very end, it'll all make sense. And then there won't be words."

She sat and pulled her knees up to her chin, gazing into my eyes. I assumed that, like Ambra, the clones were blind and used their visions of the past and future to "see" around them.

Paranoia corrected my presumption. Everything should be suspect. These cyborgs could be different. The tumor grown uninhibited but sparing the visual regions of the brain. Perhaps she actually *saw* me.

My hypotheses were pointless. Even dangerous. I had to focus.

"Why am I here?"

I don't know, Avatar Nitin.

"Don't do that!" I panicked with a False Dawn inside my head again.

"You have mind scars."

She's reading my thoughts!

I growled. "One of *your* kind attacked me."

"My kind? You don't know my kind. I'm not my kind. Not really. I'm brokenly fixed."

"I do!" I yelled. "I know them too well."

The clone bobbed her head. "Oh, I see. Most of it's erased—*she* did this, yes? She didn't want it to hurt you anymore. Anyway, I can see enough still there. They hurt you. They're made to hurt you. As am I."

My heart raced, and I pushed myself backward, away from the lilting demon.

"But if I want to hurt you, Nitin, you can't run away."

My mouth dried. "What do you want with me?"

"I don't want anything with you. *She* wants something to happen. *They* do." She studied the skies again. "I think they found what they're hoping for. It feels like we're almost out of time."

I shook my head and squeezed it with my palms. "I don't understand *any* of this!"

"I know. I don't either. There's so much for me to learn. Every step is a *lesson*, Nitin. It's the other reason we're here. Not for you, I'm sorry. For me."

"We're here for you to learn something? About me?"

"No. We've known about you thousands of years. The Daughter's consort! An important subject taught to all the children. Especially for strategy. Many think you are a flaw, a weakness to destroy her."

"Ambra?"

"Yes. Once she's destroyed, the fools believe the Orbs will fail."

I gaped, dumbfounded. "I won't hurt her."

The clone peered right through me. "The lesson isn't to know

you, but to better understand *her*. And you're part of that. There can be no healing the cosmic mind, tidying up all those broken symmetries, without parity. It's why she also seeks to comprehend me. Circle Mirror Yang Yin. Why we're reincarnated on this Möbius loop. Why I can coexist with you now. Even *touch* you!"

Before I could move, she placed an index finger between my eyes. I jumped backward and toppled.

She giggled. "So fun! They have such power in the deep future-past." The red eyebrows furrowed. "It'll be strange to destroy them."

A fierce wind swirled shorn leaves. The clone's hair whipped about us, the standing stalks gyrating in the gusts. She hummed the weird tune again and stopped, side-eyeing me, her expression solemn.

"Time. Not enough to taste all of you. Other holes bleed in your mind, Nitin Ratava," she said, closing her eyes and craning upward. "Remember, I'll take it soon. We've a terrible journey to endlessly complete."

Space split. The girl, the verdant pillars, the topaz sky, they ripped like an aged cloth unveiling a backdrop of innumerable galaxies. Both visions shattered into a thousand fragments and scattered to a dying gale.

I floated in a dark silence.

Chapter 37

What I am going to tell you about is what we teach our physics students in the third or fourth year of graduate school. It is my task to convince you not to turn away because you don't understand it. You see, my physics students don't understand it. That is because I don't understand it. Nobody does.

Richard Feynman

I awoke feeling as sick as in the dream. Ambra knelt beside me, her hand on my forehead.

"His fever broke," she said.

Others stirred beyond my field of vision. I saw an endless celestial panoply above me. Her and the stars. What else did I really need, anyway?

Delirium is a special species of truth serum.

"This is becoming dangerous for him," came the voice of Waythrel.

"I know." Her features were strained. "The last one. I'll be

much more careful. I was too eager to get here and see what was happening."

I was down for two more days. Meanwhile, we floated outside the Dram homeworld in our invisible enclosure. I had heard stories and seen holos of the red giant star at the center of the system. It was something else to be close to it, "in the flesh." The wavelength-shifted glare oppressed human sensibilities. The dominant crimson washed out, tanned, and faded to other hues. The deserts of New Earth held more vitality.

The parched world of our enemies lurked below. When I had recovered the ability to work my suit, we planned our approach to the planet's surface. Ambra wanted to go straight to the seat of power, to the emperor's palace. She believed we could enter undetected yet observe everything. Their prime strategies would be open to us. We could uncover much to help our efforts in the war.

More importantly, we could learn about the Anti and their plans. From what she'd seen in the captured officer's mind, we might find them in this system. The remainder of my team feared they might be able to detect our approach. I shared their concern, but my level of trust in Ambra was high.

Too high, as I would soon realize.

"We don't know their tech," said Williams. "If the Dram can't see or stop us, those *ghosts* could have something that can."

"It's possible," said Ambra, "but unlikely."

"Why?" asked Moore. His face was stern. He wanted to hear reasoned arguments.

Waythrel interjected. "The Anti aren't magical, Sergeant. They may be composed of particle inverses to ours, but the same laws of nature apply to them. In fact, in their own antimatter galaxies, they could resemble close copies of any life-form in our galaxy. Imagine a mirror. Everything is inverted but basically identical. Atomic physics, chemistry, *biology*. While not compatible with us, they would be entirely recognizable."

"Well, they still have tech we don't understand. Purposes we don't get," said Moore. "How about some *detectors* we don't know about?"

Ambra sighed. "Okay, yes. Any advanced alien technology is unpredictable. So far, they haven't been able to counter my effects on spacetime. Nothing makes me think this will be different for cloaking us on Dram. I think it's a risk worth taking."

We reached a compromise. We would take an initial gamble and descend to the surface, ready to rocket out at the first sign of discovery. First, we would enter the atmosphere and test their long-range scanning abilities. Next, we would hover over the central city of Gred, the location of the emperor. If things went well, we would proceed to the palace itself and find out what we could.

Ambra assured us she could make a dash for the Orb. From what I had seen in our adventures so far, I had no doubts. What I didn't know and would soon discover was just how fast she could actually fly.

We left the bodies of Kim and Fox orbiting the world in their private enclosure. The luminosity of the red giant hardly faded as we entered the atmosphere. The environment took on an orange hue, as if rust leaked out of the sky itself. For a human to spend much time here would be psychologically damaging.

Nothing happened in response to our presence. Ambra didn't sense anything. No warships or ground-based defenses engaged with our penetration of the airspace.

The deep desert of Dram filled my vision. An orange sea dwarfing the Sahara, spanning the entire planet. The expanse overwhelmed. I focused on the growing shape of the capital city to orient.

It was a gigantic sprawl, ten times the largest metropolis back home. The buildings were a stark contrast to human design. Few sharp lines protruded. They shunned glass despite all the silicon

dioxide in the parched grains. Shapes were curvilinear. My mind mapped the visuals to memories of New Earth with massive distortion in the process. Take Manhattan, multiply by one thousand, turn it to sand, and spray enough water to melt the edges. That would be an echo of the alienness of Gred.

We dashed over the urban bugscape in our bubble. Part of me felt vulnerable. We perched over the largest city of our deadliest foes. Our craft had no discernible walls. We were a collection of three soldiers, an alien, and the wildcard that was the Daughter. She should have been enough after all I had seen. I ought to have been calm. But I wasn't.

"It appears almost deserted," said Waythrel. "Sky traffic is minimal."

"That's where they held my tribunal," said Ambra, her tones subdued.

An enormous dome rose over the metropolis. Composed of the metallic, marble-like substance found across Dram architecture, it gleamed. Cut with thousands of facets, it reflected the bloody starlight. The enormity matched in near-perfect detail the descriptions in the history books.

She turned away and pointed to smaller buildings nearby. "That's where they imprisoned me. They took my eggs to make those pathetic abominations."

I'd never heard this tone in her voice. Not sadness at her losses. Not anger. A strain at the mention of the clones.

The emperor's palace thrust out of the cityscape in front of us. Unlike the city-sized dome of the Tribunal, it rocketed upward like an obscene termite mound, dominating all other structures in Gred. Military craft darted about the tower. They established a protective radial grid of hovercraft with stunning amounts of firepower. One thing about the Dram, they sure knew how to militarize the hell out of anything.

"The emperor lives at the top." Ambra gestured. "It gives the

bug a god's-eye view, feeding the monumental egos they always have."

Williams laughed. "Except for the one you nearly destroyed centuries ago, right? When you escaped? Unless the history books lie. Must have been a bit humbled."

She glanced away. "What happened then isn't something I'm proud of."

The sea of guarding spacecraft ignored us. We passed through their ranks undetected. It was a tense few minutes, and as MECH-core soldiers, we were the most anxious in this explosive environment.

Waythrel exuded calm. Ambra retained a sharp focus that had possessed her since we left Hola. Perhaps it was returning to this hell world, distressing memories assaulting her. Did this explain her odd state? Perhaps, but it felt like more.

We approached the enormous palace, the sides gleaming in the ruby light. Our craft didn't slow down. Just as it seemed we would smash ourselves to pieces on the hard walls, they *bent*. Where they moved *to,* I can't describe because my mind can't grasp it. A passage appeared in the wall we alone could perceive.

Our invisible pod popped through it.

Chapter 38

All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.

Edgar Allen Poe

We haunted the emperor's palace like some aggregated poltergeist. The four of us hovered near the tops of the enormous ceilings. We observed the royal court perform their rituals underneath, oblivious to our presence. It took little time to confirm Ambra's worst suspicions.

The alien architects had designed an epic throne-floor for the insectile ruler. A grand hallway led from an elevator to a central chamber. Domed on the inside, the room centered on an elaborated cathedra for their god-king. Despite extraterrestrial divergences, it was easy to connect to human desires. We too loved to aggrandize our rulers, our teachers, our prophets. The more I saw of these aliens, the more uncomfortable I felt at the similarities. I

suspected humanity shared more with this fanatical species than with the Xix.

The emperor was in its chambers, slumping on the throne. An expected flurry of activity buzzed around the chief insect. Petitions pleaded, orders given, problems raised, deals negotiated, and strategies plotted. Waythrel's translator cast different speakers with distinct voices. It helped us follow the conversations.

"Dram is suffering, Holy One," came a pining voice inside our bubble. "Crops are neglected. Power and resources are diverted to the Project. The alien harvests are consuming all we have. Dissent is growing. There is talk of rebellion."

The emperor droned. "Is that all?"

I watched the many legs of the petitioner dance at this response. "Yes, Lord."

"Take this message back to the local governors. The Project is *all* that matters. Defeat of the human Reader is the highest priority. The war cannot be won without it. Suffering creates strength. Any resistance to the Divine Orders will be met with death. The fields will expand."

The giant bug in front of the throne straightened its long torso, lowering its head before its sovereign. It turned and scampered out of the room.

"The emperor acts drugged," said Ambra.

Waythrel agreed. "We have both spent enough time on Dram. We know the personalities and character of these creatures. She is right—something is amiss."

Ambra's eyes darted like lasers. "Let's get closer. There's a lot of room in the back of that chair, and no traffic."

Our bubble descended. Nestled behind the cathedra, we were able to spy without becoming an obstacle. More importantly, we obtained a view of the back of the ruler.

"What the hell is on its head?" asked Moore.

"A crown," said Waythrel. "Of a kind."

He didn't mean the cap with its threaded braids hanging half a foot below the creature. He pointed to something else.

"No, there—underneath the decorations. The thing *in* its head. I don't think I've ever seen that in my readings or meetings with the Dram."

"It's embedded in its brain," said Williams, a scowl on her face.

"Ambra, can you allow me to approach?" asked the Xix.

"Yes. Just walk," she said. "Be careful. If you get too close, and it moves and hits you, it'll feel a disturbance. Remember, all of you, we're vulnerable veiled like this."

The alien stepped away from us toward the throne. I knew we were encased in an invisible barrier, but it required an imaginative focus to continue to believe without sensory feedback. My instincts were screaming that Waythrel would be discovered. Part of me wished the Dram would just shoot at us again. At least I'd have the sense *something* was present. And cloaked, those shots might actually do us some harm.

The Xix approached. Its eyestalks extended to the box stuck inside the glistening exoskeleton. After a minute or two, the alien returned.

"I have never seen it before," it said. "I passed five decades here, and nothing like this device existed."

"Could be new," said Moore. "Been a few hundred years since you visited."

"Could be reserved for the rulers," I added.

"The technology is not Dramian—that was clear on inspection," said Waythrel. "The raw materials are from the planet, however. I have studied their physiology in exquisite detail. The mechanism inserts into the mental organ that controls conscious choice. The only reason to embed a machine there is to override or modify the will of the emperor."

"Wait," said Williams. "The box is controlling its brain? The bugs didn't make it?"

"The Anti," said Moore.

"You heard them," said Ambra. "The emperor is killing Dram. This Project is working the population to exhaustion. It bleeds the resources of the planet. Some of this I saw in the mind of the soldier at Hola. To see it at this level is something else."

"What are these fields? What are they harvesting?" I asked.

"Not food," said Waythrel. "The reports of starvation and rebellion suggest a different crop."

"Whatever it is, it has to do with you," said Moore, pointing at Ambra. "Their plan is to build something to kill *you*."

"Agreed," she said. "So, you'll excuse me if I'm motivated to go find them and see for myself."

"Find them—how?" I asked.

"They cannot be far," said the Xix. "If power and resources are diverted from Gred, the location is likely on the outskirts of the city."

"Wait—shouldn't we listen in? Discover more?" asked Williams.

"Perhaps," said Waythrel. "However, I can't think of anything more pressing than determining how they are working to murder the Daughter."

"I agree," I said.

Moore cocked his head to one side. "Crops for harvesting. To kill Ambra Dawn. I think I know what they're growing."

I caught my breath. I could guess too.

Waythrel's eyes swiveled and stared at all of us. "We need to go find these fields."

Chapter 39

If only one could make time stand still; if one could erase all the horror and inhumanity in the world.

Thea Halo, *Not Even My Name*

We found the fields.

Take the giant AgriCom farms from Ambra's youth in the Midwest. Replace them with humans instead of corn or cattle. Multiply by a factor of one hundred and drop the entire thing into the oven-baked landscapes of Dram. You would have some idea of what spread out before us.

Kilometer after hectare. Housing, pens, birthing factories, biotech. We uncovered an industrialized assembly line producing people. Squares of parceled land marked the repeating installations. Facilities constructed and optimized to manufacture copies of a single person. Sickened, we coasted across a sea of duplicated buildings, workers, and Ambra Dawns.

At first, we kept high over the fields, scanning the layout. We marveled at the absurd lengths to which our enemies had gone.

Wonder mutated to disgust as we descended into the compounds. The abominations below kicked us in the teeth.

I'd fill books detailing the horrors we witnessed. How we swooped into structures, entered labs and factories, pursued the clones. We spied on the laborers. Ambra pilfered information from their thoughts. Hardly needed, as function followed form. A summary is sufficient. It repulses me to remember it now, and the briefer I can be, the better.

Dram technicians staffed the biotech facilities, but it was obvious they didn't drive the research. Other aliens, unknown even to the Xix, directed activities. Were they brought in to perform specialized work? For other reasons? We had no idea and no time to explore the history of this gigantic sprawl of asylums.

Behind the novel alien workers, pulling every string and setting each course, were the Anti. Energy-gulping protective containers shielded them from the surrounding matter. The seat of power was clear. The unknown species took instructions from these shadowed boxes. They relayed the research protocols to the subordinate local techs.

Waythrel estimated that the labs had been in operation for hundreds of years. They may have opened soon after the reversal of the Great Calamity. What had they been working toward for so long and with such dedication? It became obvious in the neonatal wards—or, more accurately, birthing factories.

The human slaves of the Dram, and their generations of descendants, paid a terrible price. They were the experimental animals on which the Anti applied their dark technology. How many had suffered and died at the hands of these psychopathic monsters, I didn't know. I could guess some of it when I saw the products of their diabolical R&D.

They had bioengineered women into fetus-manufacturing units of a hellish nature. Each "mother" in the production centers had become a demonic fusion of flesh and machine,

cybernetic organisms invaded and controlled by hundreds of wires and tubes. Their midsections distended beyond recognition. Wombs were augmented tenfold their natural size. The rest of the body had reversed. Atrophied, shrunken to the point that the functional endpoint couldn't be missed. They'd designed everything about the warped creatures for one thing: growing humans.

Produce them they did with artificially inseminated and implanted embryos. Cloning technologies. Hybrid protocols. The labs pursued diverse approaches in parallel. These womb-sacks, human in ancestry alone, gestated at many times the normal rate. We didn't have time to find out how. Specialized nutrition? Hormones, genetic changes? It wasn't relevant in some broader sense. The Anti with their Dram pawns had developed biomechanizations to take the initial stock of eggs stolen from the Daughter and create an industrial production line for growing copies of her.

Within weeks of implantation, they harvested each birther. Robotic implements inserted into the exaggerated wombs and remove upwards of ten fetuses. These couldn't survive outside the womb. The automation plunged them into artificial incubators for a second round of gestation. How they had optimized this—the timing, design, hormone and nutrient balancing—was as unclear as it was astounding. It worked with horrible efficiency.

Ambra discovered more shocking information from the minds of the techs. In the span of a month, they had crawling infants. Within a year, prepubescent girls. After five years, functional adult clones, who could manipulate space and time. Their investment required extraordinary patience. At the end, they had industrialized the production of the ultimate bioweapons.

We examined several sites. With the arrival of newer technology, they simply built updated factories. The older plants continued operating until the product or protocols were too infe-

rior. Those, they shut down. The desert was littered with abandoned buildings.

An acceleration of development was a critical component to the process. Penned herds of little Ambra Dawns created a sea of orange hair like some strange crop. Humans shepherded them. Put them through trials. Taught them odd lessons to our eyes. But the instruction functioned to enhance the artificial program to produce these weaponized slaves.

How much experimentation in mental maturation had they performed? They studied and probed their human cattle at every site. Rudimentary cultures developed within their prisons. Alien scientists observed. Extraterrestrial ranchers mimicked the societal structures in the raising of their prized breeds.

The rejected failures of their efforts were one of the saddest parts of this terrible story. Deformed, brain damaged, emotionally traumatized—they were the most plentiful population. They didn't live long. Tested, tortured, probed—the researchers tried to find what they had done wrong. Afterward, they killed and discarded the faulty product.

In this way, the scope of the monstrous plan was revealed to us. Now we knew where the clones originated. It was clear the Anti were just warming up. Our enemies would be patient. I shuddered to think of the suffering to come. Their continued efforts constituted a crime of galactic proportions.

And their use? One of those things in the desert had been enough. *An army?*

Ambra zeroed in on the newest fields, clustered north from Gred. The clone development in these locations was far superior. The minds of the False Dawns more intact, more capable. Their signature and distortion of spacetime was extreme.

Thousands filled those spaces. Tens of thousands in the largest complex alone. It was at this site of our enemy's greatest progress where events took a terrible turn and our mission ended.

Chapter 40

Those who understand evil pardon it.

George Bernard Shaw

"I want to speak with one of them."

She was agitated. Gone was the tranquility I associated with her knowledge of time. Her features contorted in distress, eyes darting, hands clenched at her sides. Had we been under less stressful conditions, it would have been easier to empathize. But I couldn't stop myself from protesting.

"Ambra, no!" I said. "We got what we came for. We've pushed our luck far enough. Let's take what we know, get the hell out of here, and put together a plan of action when we have time. When we can summon resources. *Armies*."

"He's right," said Waythrel. "The risks outweigh the benefits in this."

Her eyes were wild. "I said I want to speak to one of them. And I will, whatever any of you say."

"Look, sister," said Moore, "what you say we have a wee vote on this? When did this become a dictatorship?"

"When everything that has happened has been possible because of me!" she said. "I got us to every world. I protected us from the Dram. I uncovered this information. I'm asking that we talk to *one* of the clones. Only *one*. I can handle it."

Williams stood in front of the Daughter. "You're losing your mind on this one, girl. In case you missed some important things, we've got two human purées waiting for us in orbit. You didn't see *that* coming. You didn't stop it. So, how about you back off from the almighty god thing and quit ordering us around?"

"Ambra, please—" I began.

"Do you know what it must be like for these girls? Do you have any idea what it's like to grow up as a guinea pig in a hostile lab? Where they starve you, beat you, shock you, and cut on you? Turn you slowly, steadily, into a monster, a dark, twisted form of what you should have been? Where your worth lives only in their approvals?" She waited as if we would answer. "Well, *I* do!"

Waythrel tried to intervene. "Whatever pain the clones have endured cannot be—"

"Look at them!" she said, gesturing in front of our bubble at the sea of orange hair beneath us. "Thousands of them! At least I had a few years of love from my parents. I grew at some human pace. These things—their mothers are nightmares. They have no fathers. They have no normal development. You want proof of hell? You don't have to search any further." Tears dripped down the sides of her cheeks.

I put my hand on her shoulder. "Okay, Ambra. I'll come with you."

"Ah, shit," cursed Moore, turning away in frustration.

"Listen!" I said. "She can send the rest of you away, back through the Orb or something. You don't have to be involved."

"For myself," said the Xix, "I am not concerned. My primary

fear is for the Daughter. To engage these advanced clones would risk much. You don't know their powers."

"I defeated the one in the desert, Waythrel," said Ambra. "I'll be careful. I'll choose one and bring it inside the enclosure, sealed away, unseen by the others. If we're attacked, I'll kill it."

"Why don't we kill it now?" said Moore. "You remember what that thing did in the Sahara, right?"

She stared at him but touched my cheek with her palm. "I remember. But I didn't know about this. I hadn't *seen* this. I hated them before—the very idea of them. Now...now I feel pity."

"What do you think you will accomplish by speaking with one of them?" asked the alien.

"I don't know, but I need to find out," she said. "I have to know if there is any hope."

"For what?" asked Moore, flinging his hands into the air.

"Hope they can be saved. That there's something inside them I can save."

Chapter 41

Everything you do reverberates throughout a thousand destinies.

Nikos Kazantzakis

In the end, everyone signed on to the crazy idea.

Signed their death warrants. All because, deep down, we were all committed to the Daughter, and she had to do this. I was the first to grasp her desperate need, but the others came to recognize it. Foolish or not, it was impossible to stop her. We were either with her, or we would abandon her to this fate.

She floated the invisible spacetime bubble over the enormous compound. We passed the birthing warehouses, the labs, the pens of hundreds and thousands of tiny Ambra Dawns.

For me, it was hardest to see the child clones. I didn't know when the brainwashing took hold. When they became creatures seeking to slaughter us, to kill their progenitor, to destroy the planet of their origins. Seeing the small ones, I saw innocence in their eyes. Children's eyes. This gave me the empathy to experience

Ambra's pain. I believed the cause to be hopeless. Perhaps she did as well. But I understood why she had to try.

We slowed near the demented "schools" where the older children received instruction. Preteens, early teens—their biological age, not years, as their development was rushed. The period when the tumor and its powers developed and flourished. The Anti had modified all of them surgically by this point, with the invasive machine technology embedded in their bodies. All had forfeited some aspect of their humanity. Most had probably already lost their free will.

They never properly slept. Instead, unconscious, machines sent electrochemical signals through their brains. Waythrel guessed it was an accelerated learning and maturation protocol. One twisted part of the long research program fashioning the clones. Items on an assembly line. Ready for shipment into battle.

Awake, they were subjected to tests. Dram and human trainers attached them to devices or placed individuals in open fields. Their powers over spacetime were examined, challenged, and augmented. Some of the older specimens served as advanced teachers as well. The Anti had learned to preserve extensive features of our culture. Hierarchy, mentorship, and social bonding recreated despite the dysfunctional setting. They had perfected the madness and addiction of cult attachment.

We followed a group of younger teens from sleeping quarters to practice arenas. One of the girls was several steps behind the others.

"She'll do." The enclosure swooped down beside the clone. "They won't miss her for a few minutes."

Williams rolled her eyes, but we had committed. We neared, and the cyborg stumbled, bumping into an invisible wall. Disoriented, she tried to walk forward but was stopped, enveloped in the bubble.

"Don't panic," said Ambra. "They can't see her, and she can't reach us. But she can see us."

The girl turned around.

"Ah, shit, here we go," muttered Moore, charging up his ion slingers.

My warrant officer followed in short order.

Ambra walked up to the False Dawn and spoke. "What is your name?"

Biologically, the child appeared twelve or thirteen. Her eyes darted between us, her face tense. She was frightened but determined. "A4552, Teacher."

"You're blocking your mind from me."

"Affirmative, Instructor. Directive 3. Never lower defenses in the field."

"I want you to disregard Directive 3 right now, please."

She swallowed. "This is heresy. Is this a new exam?"

"Yes. I want you to share your thoughts with me."

"We live to kill the Originator," she chanted. "We do not break the laws."

"You won't commune with me?"

Her breathing increased. Sweat trickled down her cheek.

"Sit down." The child sat, and Ambra followed suit. "If you will not open your awareness, I will enter it myself."

"I will defend."

"I thought you would."

The False Dawn screamed. She grabbed her head as her eyes rolled back in her head. Ambra tensed. She shut her eyes. Her mouth set in a tight line. The clone moaned, rocking back and forth. She held her head, the pitch of her groans rising and falling like some tortured animal.

I recoiled at the agonized sounds. I checked with Moore and Williams. Both shook their heads. The eyestalks of Waythrel danced, but the alien didn't intervene.

"No! Liar!" hissed the False Dawn. "Not *true*! *Stop!*" Blood trickled from the inserted tubes in her skull. "*Liar!*"

"You're killing it!" I shouted.

Ambra stiffened. The clone's eyes opened wide. It spoke in a demonic voice projected like a loudspeaker. "*The Originator. She is here. She is here. Come. Kill. She is here!*"

Ambra's face was strained. Space undulated. The bubble lost integrity as waves propagated outward from the clone.

"She's losing control of the thing!" yelled Williams. She stepped forward and sighted the girl in her targeting system, raising her arms to fire.

She was torn apart. Blood sprayed across my face, and tissue exploded in all directions. Body parts were slung against the walls of the enclosure.

"*No!*" Ambra shouted. "Nitin! Waythrel! They're programmed! Automatic!" She labored to speak. "I can't stop it! It will reach them."

I grasped my temples. The sound of its voice concussed my mind.

She is here. She is here. She is here. She is here.

I managed to raise my eyes. Moore was kneeling, his hands to his head. Waythrel's eyestalks were darting around wildly and the alien stumbled as if it might topple over.

She is here. She is here. She is here. She is here.

Ambra shouted again and stood, a terrible strain on her features. "*No!*"

The clone arched its back, the tubes exploding out of its skull, along with blood and bone. A red paint splashed against the invisible barrier behind it and dripped slowly downward. The False Dawn swayed backward, eyes a possessed white. Its face slackened, and the body crumbled.

The voice in my mind stopped. The child didn't move. I staggered to my feet, dizzy, unsteady, and slumped beside Ambra. The

enclosure smelled of bodily fluids. A metallic taste coated my tongue.

I sensed movement in my peripheral vision. A fog of orange rose around us, deepening, congealing and choking out other shapes and colors. I placed my hand on Ambra's shoulder.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Oh, Nitin."

Her desperate eyes peered outside the capsule. I followed her gaze and focused. A swarming herd converged on our position. Red hair. Green eyes. Thousands of clones. They knew where we were. They saw us now.

Waythrel spoke. "The dead clone triggered them. They know *you* are here! They are coming for you. Uncloak us! Harden the enclosure, now!"

Ambra shook her head. "What have I done?"

Chapter 42

By a route obscure and lonely,
Haunted by ill angels only,
Where an Eidolon, named NIGHT,
On a black throne reigns upright,
I have reached these lands but newly
From an ultimate dim Thule—
From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime,
Out of SPACE—out of TIME.

Edgar Allen Poe

The entire compound turned on us. I don't know how many swarmed. Thousands. Hundreds with the power we battled in the desert. I know she couldn't have repelled them on her own. Their numbers were too large. She must have tapped into the Orb, which brings this part of the story to a most dark and ironic conclusion.

"Kill all that you can!" she shrieked.

The contrast to the empathic hurt she had felt a few hours earlier couldn't have been greater. We didn't need convincing. The thing had ripped our warrant officer to shreds beside us. Ambra had seen its mind, known its thoughts and feelings. That she had now jettisoned all concern for their well-being said a lot.

"I don't know what we can do!" I called. "We're only two!"

Moore and I blasted without restraint, creating considerable carnage. The clones had no armor, and they were too focused on attacking *the Originator* to erect defenses to our munitions. They stood before us like ducks on a pond. With our missiles and ion slingers, we likely downed hundreds in half a minute. The mutilation painted a hellscape.

No doubt our Daughter of Time was a big part of that success story. She had semi-permeabilized the enclosure. Our assaults penetrated, but the walls resisted entrance from outside. Not that the cyborgs raised any weapons. Their battle occurred on a different plane of existence. Shielding came in handy when the Dram military arrived and attacked.

Soon, piles of slaughtered clones encircled us. Waythrel sat with Ambra in the center of the bubble. They clasped hands and settled into a deep Reader trance like the one we had seen at Gyl. I could see in her face the tension, the fatigue as her energies faded. I didn't know how long we could hold out.

Massive disturbances erupted everywhere. The ground heaved and buckled. Space contorted. Time and again our enclosure suffered assaults that bent the air. Meanwhile, our MECHcore usefulness decreased. The missiles were spent. The clones deflected our ion rays once recognizing our threat.

Chaos and mayhem reigned outside. Mirroring Williams's death, Ambra shredded the False Dawns. It was literally a meat grinder out there. I would have turned away from the visceral horror, but it caught me like a deer in headlights. The sheer fleshy

decimation stunned me. Only the shield of the capsule kept us from drowning in blood and gore.

A strange seasickness churned my stomach from both the time distortion and physical carnage. Back and forth, the pace of events rocked. Slow, fast, skipping moments, backtracking to create repeated experiences of déjà vu. Holes opened and closed, tunnels to nowhere and from nothing. The veins bulged on Ambra's brow, and the alien changed to a deep shade of purple. The stresses would kill them.

"Ambra, punch a hole through it and get us out!"

I'm trying, Nitin! They've cast nets over us! Her voice battered my brain.

Moore was grim, his face a scowl. "We're not going to make it out of this. These roaches are pouring out of the woodwork."

A flood of False Dawns approached. They ignored the horrific fates of the mangled bodies surrounding us. They were fanatical, devoted to destroying us. If she didn't get through whatever they were doing soon, we were dead.

A bright light flashed in my eyes, and I tripped, dropping to one knee. *Flash bomb?* No, I could still see. It wasn't a device. Instead, standing behind Waythrel was an apparition from my nightmares.

The little demon child from the cornfields. In the midst of all these identical clones, I recognized her. Her movements. The sparkle in her eye. The slight twitch at the corners of her mouth when she noticed I was staring.

"*You?*" I gasped.

A cry interrupted me. I tore away from the devil girl and saw Ambra flat on her back, a stunned expression on her face.

The young clone grabbed Waythrel's upper arm, and the alien collapsed.

"Nitin! Help me! I can't move! Stop her!"

The thing smiled. It smirked at me and winked. Another

glaring flash and I shut my eyes. When I turned back, nothing. The child was gone. The Xix, vanished. The space they occupied, empty.

Ambra sprang forward with a wail toward where they had been. She landed on her knees grasping air, tears on her face, a wild, mad glare burning in her eyes.

"*Waythrel!*"

The agony of her scream cut deep inside me. I stumbled, concussed. The alien's disappearance accomplished what ten thousand attacking clones had not. It broke her focus. The bubble collapsed.

Into the breach, a False Dawn flew like a possessed witch. Red hair billowing behind it, hands upraised like claws and a homicidal death mask on its face. Ambra didn't respond. She didn't move. She held herself, her arms wrapped around her chest as she rocked.

I launched forward, but I knew I couldn't make the distance in time.

An impact both metallic and fleshy reverberated. Moore's suit blasted upward, his shoulder set as it smashed into the stomach of the clone. I could hear the creature's spine snap as its body arced from the collision, and the two rocketed high into the air. A red cloud darted in pursuit.

His actions shocked Ambra out of her state. She jumped, the remaining cyborgs once again boxed out by a wall. Gazing into the cluttered sky, she saw what I did. It was too late. The False Dawns had ripped him to pieces.

"Ambra—"

She held up her hand and closed her eyes, wrinkles spreading from the corners as she squeezed. Despite the clones redoubling their assaults, their progress reversed. An invisible force pushed them back. Then the hallucinations began.

Many aged horribly, their skin drying and peeling off their bones. Bodies that, seconds ago, attacked, burst into rusty clouds.

Crawling around in the dust were tens, hundreds of infants. Structures outside swayed. The warehouses and laboratories rippled. Arriving Dram military craft disassembled and rained fragments onto the sands.

"They're still *here*," growled Ambra.

"Who?" I said, my eyes bugged at the impossibilities I witnessed.

"Waythrel is in the system! We have to hurry. They're heading for the Orb!"

She glared upward and grasped my hand. Two things happened. We blasted off the ground in our enclosure, the surface of the planet receding. Below, a catastrophic detonation.

The entire clone field flattened. Circular ripples extended outward and leveled everything in their path. The cyborgs, buildings, perhaps extensive regions of Gred itself, were annihilated in the destruction.

I didn't watch long. I turned my eyes forward as we ascended toward the heavens.

A doomed pursuit began.

Chapter 43

Madness rides the star-wind...claws and teeth sharpened on centuries of corpses...dripping death astride a bacchanale of bats from night-black ruins of buried temples of Belial.

H. P. Lovecraft

We rocketed upward.

I don't know the fate of the remaining colony of clones. Had they tried to pursue but Ambra held them back? Were they so incapacitated by the Daughter's wild destruction that they couldn't?

Whichever, none followed. I traveled faster than I'd ever experienced alongside a mad goddess. Her eyes glowed green. Shockwaves exploded in the atmosphere as we blasted toward space like a meteor in reverse.

She released my hand and placed her own against the enclosure walls. Our momentum made me mimic the motion, although the need was illusory. Everything within the bubble remained stable and unperturbed. In a few short seconds, we thrust forward

into blackness. The planet receded behind. We hurled past its two moons. Looming before us—growing closer at a shocking rate—the incandescent outline of the Orb.

I had never seen the Time Sphere like this. It differed from the breathtaking power shown in previous battles. What I saw now was a supernova. It outshone the red giant. Its surface was a churning, chromatic cyclone channeling hostility. For the first time, I began to truly fear the thing.

Ambra focused on the chase, saying nothing, her entire body tense like a rod. Following her gaze, I tracked a pair of bodies ahead. Waythrel and the False Dawn. We closed the distance. They hurtled straight for the Orb.

A chilling certainty trickled through me. Somehow, however impossible, I knew our efforts would fail. The creature that had kidnapped Ambra's dearest friend held the power to use the portal. We would lose the Xix. The clone would escape. To what purpose, I had no inkling.

No! We won't lose them! The thoughts from Ambra exploded in my mind. *We'll follow them through any pathway to any place or time!*

You can do this?

Watch me!

The sphere storm—I had no other phrase for it—intensified, responding to her thoughts. Its light was offset with black clouds, vortexes, tunnels, and membranes. The protrusions and invaginations prodded and penetrated through space from distant dimensions. The radiance pressed like thunder—so bright it assaulted the senses. The darkness pulled at something profound within me, primal. Every paranoia I'd known stirred from slumber. The brewing cataclysm in the cauldron gaped, its circumference an open maw. The titanic fronts of fog glinted like teeth. My feet were rooted, unable to move as I stared stupidly ahead.

The pair vanished into the Orb. We dashed, mere seconds from entering the maelstrom ourselves.

I still see you, clone. You can't get away!

She wasn't speaking to me, yet I experienced the words. She screamed to the universe, beyond the shapes we pursued. My mind happened to be in the blast radius. Possessed, she would follow the thing to hell and back if necessary.

The memory of the horrible traversals ran through me like shards of glass. All of them had sickened me, several reaching levels of incapacitating pain. Now we would enter again, under more hostile conditions. Both she and the sphere struggled. Space seethed.

I knew she would hunt the clone through labyrinthine dimensions. But the wicked girl held power as well. This would be no prepared journey, no warm stroll on the edges of the galaxy. This would be a wild pursuit on a rocket through the fire. I closed my eyes and assumed the worst, tightening my throat to smother any screams.

But it was not me who cried out. My eyes flew open. I couldn't process what I was seeing.

The Orb reached a maniacal climax. The frothing storm of spacetime stretched to swallow us. But the epic background was secondary.

Limbs outstretched, her face contorted in rage and pain, Ambra rose. Forces flattened her against an invisible slab, paralyzed. Chained and restrained, she thrashed. She gawked into the devouring mouth before us.

She wailed again. Her arms twitched, her back arched, and the surface of the portal rippled like the sea underneath a squall. Lightning erupted from the black clouds. Rays of light splintered space. Blood leaked from her nose, and her body convulsed.

"Ambra, no!" *You're killing yourself!*

I grabbed her feet. Touching them, an electric charge threw

me across our capsule. My hands burned and went numb. My vision blurred, and I strained to focus. I tried to stand, but my legs refused. I couldn't move, crumpled and helpless on the transparent floor of the enclosure. Powerless, I gaped at this atrocity in growing horror like some broken and discarded trinket.

She continued to rise, a harrowing statue, her form frozen. In this numbness consuming me, it felt as if the bubble were nothing more than an illusion. Nothing separated her from the Orb. Reality had become a Titan raging in anger, and it grasped my beloved and ripped her from me.

Still she rose, fifty feet above me, paralyzed, unmoving. The False Dawn and Waythrel had vanished. They were long gone, and I guessed Ambra sensed it better than me. I could see the muscles across her body straining, twitching, trying to find some way out of this invisible prison.

The ascension ceased. Seconds dragged like hours. She floated alone, a fleshly form dangled before the door to heaven or hell. I fought again to move, but it was fruitless. I would not be able to reach my lover. I was helpless to intervene. Stunned by this madness, I knew I was a fool. I was arrogant for presuming a soldier could involve himself in the affairs of gods.

At this moment of resignation and despair, reality took leave of its senses. Or the electrical discharge wrecking my nervous system had damaged my mind as well. This is the sole explanation I can find for what I next witnessed, but you can judge my memory as you will.

As I gazed through tears toward my beloved, shapes stirred in the bubbling broth of the Orb. Indistinct, small spheres resembling cyclones in the greater chaos assumed structure. Definition. Recognizable patterns.

Chills swept through me. The surface was forming *faces*.

A few clarified, titanic, the size of cities. Thousands. *Millions*.

Uncountable numbers of masks bubbled through a necromancer's abominable brew. Many were human. More were not.

The mouths chanted.

It was like no music I've ever heard or experienced since. I'm not sure *music* is the right word to describe it, but I have no other. More complex than the greatest symphony. Pure and clear as a temple chant. Melodies distinctly terrestrial mixed with ten thousand orthogonal, alien modalities.

The chorus swelled.

The simulacrums coalesced. The harmonies heightened. The sound spilled into the empty void, and it was filled. The Orb ceased to churn, the surface of the hypersphere calmed to a placid lake. The disembodied faces moved. They summoned a music with more substance than the sparse matter of the universe itself.

It was beautiful. And it was hideous.

It transcended what I could grasp or appreciate. My awareness drowned. Consumed, I withdrew. A survival instinct. My paralyzed body shut down, and I felt myself slipping away. The edges of my vision darkened, blurred, and like a sinking shipwreck victim, I flailed, treading water.

As my consciousness bobbed above the chanting currents, the visions bent bizarre. Two Ambras adorned the night. My beloved hung as a hazy outline. Facing her, spanning the size of continents, a form bubbled from the spacetime broth of the Orb. Tendrils of light and cloud clung to it and plunged back into the infinite sphere.

It was Ambra, but not as I would ever wish to see her. Mirroring the paralyzed position of the Daughter, this titanic apparition glided toward her with arms outstretched to the side, unmoving.

Broken. The hands mutilated. The flesh ripped and jagged. Worms or cables crawled through the skin of its limbs. Blood flowed outward and stained the fabric of space.

The horror continued. The body materializing before us was further desecrated. The skull was sliced open, bone removed, the brain spilling out in layers across a black slime. A giant tumor, some mountainous mimic of my dear Ambra's neural nexus, lay like an obscene egg in its own depression on the reflective darkness. Living tubes of dark materials slithered into those mental tissues and merged with them. The entire malignancy mutated into a nightmarish mixture of flesh and machine.

For a third and last time, Ambra screamed.

She broke through the forces holding her. Her mouth cracked, and a cry of devastating pain ripped through the cosmos. I was convinced the geometry of spacetime would be forever shattered. Unrecoverable. She wailed into the void, waves of sound beating through me, the tsunami of her torture unbearable.

She fell.

A second electric shock coursed through my body. I moved. My sight clarified as the psychedelic vapors dissipated. I leaped forward, my suit granting me speed and power to catch her. She landed roughly in my arms.

All illumination from the Orb was gone. An eye of the night, it glared at us in a deep black. No faces. No chanting. No chorus of the gods. The monstrous apparition of Ambra was nowhere to be seen. A stillness and stunning silence spread thick like smoke.

And stars.

Suns circumambient, shining through the lucidity of our journey's spacetime vesicle.

I sensed the softness of her flesh through the suit. I longed to hold her without this artificial barrier separating us. Her eyes were closed. Scarlet strands swam down my arms. Her ivory skin glowed against the obsidian of her robe and the ebony of space.

I raised her closer to my face and bent my neck, bringing my lips to hers. I kissed her, but yanked my head back, listening.

She wasn't breathing.

Part III

Parasitism is the birth pang of symbiosis.

The Book of Xix

Chapter 44

The other gods! The gods of the outer hells that guard the feeble gods of earth!...Look away...Go back...Do not see! Do not see! The vengeance of the infinite abysses... That cursed, that damnable pit...Merciful gods of earth, I am falling into the sky!

H. P. Lovecraft

Falling.

Holding Ambra, dropping to my knees. Stay conscious. Swimming through images, murmurs.

Songs.

Endless echoing chants of limitless gods forming shapes and patterns and realities.

The dark sphere approaches, the surface envelops, the universe behind disappearing. Still I hold her tightly, refusing the call for sleep.

Peaceful rest. An end to this terrible and long struggle. The voices sing tranquility. Close my eyes, stop resisting, trust them to bring us home.

They know my name. They know my heart. And I know them. Faces of family and friends and enemies. Parents. Slain comrades. Fox and her starry-eyed faith. Kim and his childlike energies and enthusiasm. Moore with his rough and loyal mouth. Williams and her blunt analysis. Marshall and his abstracted duty.

Waythrel. The one we chased. It too is here. Alongside another Xix. On a strange and rocky shelf, they make love.

"You will meet soon."

Ambra's face. She speaks. I feel her arms.

"I hold you now as you embrace me. Let go, Nitin. It will be easier this time. Don't be afraid."

Space spins. The light labyrinth glowing and burning. A million passageways through time and song. I don't want to go down those painful roads again. I fear them.

"A last trip. This time, there will be no pain."

My own voice.

It informs me from outside me. My madness and hallucination are complete. Nightmare or imagining, I don't know. Or are they facets of a single gem? Which is waking and which is dreaming? In this impossible universe, what is real? How could such limited forms of flesh discern?

It is too much. I place Ambra down on the surface as a glowing vortex assembles around us. I lie beside her as the bubble drops, plunging into a bottomless, rotating well of radiance. I close my eyes.

We fall.

Chapter 45

I measured the skies, now the shadows I measure.
Skybound was the mind, earthbound the body rests.

Johannes Kepler, self-authored epitaph

I woke to the scratching of blowing sand.

A fierce heat burned as I fought to open my eyes. Stuck together, the eyelids refused to part. I reached to clean them but sprayed grains into my face and mouth. I coughed and spit them out, using the spittle as lubricant. It made mud. Rough to rub across my skin, but effective.

I cracked my lids further and squinted at the blinding glare. Two seas, orange and blue, faced off below and above me. Disorientation competed with the comfort of the familiar. Smelling the air and feeling the sunlight on my face, I understood. I was back on New Earth.

Ambra!

I scrambled to my hands and knees, turning in a circle. Her

body was beside mine, face up, eyes closed. I crawled to her and placed my face over her mouth.

No breath!

I grabbed her wrist but couldn't find a pulse. I forced a calm over myself. *No panic. Think*. My emotions would doom her, if she wasn't already.

I powered up my suit, relieved it held charge. I engaged the medapp and diagnostics unit on the side of the mech. Needles and probes extended into her arm, taking samples. The AI reported in clinical terms.

"Anomalous asystole diagnosed without discernible trauma. No evidence of serious internal injuries detected. Body temperature normal."

No obvious harm. Still a chance to revive her!

"Immediate CPR recommended with intravenous vasopressor."

It had been over a year since I had refreshed my training. *Stay calm.*

"What's an intravenous vasopressor?"

"Medkit epinephrine is provided to all MECHcore battle units."

Adrenaline!

I reached around and detached the kit, pressing the keypad to open the box. Inside was a massive syringe labeled *epinephrine*. I grabbed it, removed the safety cap, and plunged the end into her arm. I kept it there for about ten seconds for the solution to drain.

I tossed it to the side and rose over her on my knees, the sand scraping beneath the metal of my suit. Sweat beaded over my eyebrows, smearing my vision. I placed my hands above her sternum and began rhythmic compressions. Squeezing her heart. Forcing blood through her body, oxygen and nutrients and adrenaline.

I pressed hard, as instructed, and after six, I heard the first rib

break. *No!* I couldn't let it distract me. It happened, I remembered from the training. I tried not to think about breaking my beloved's bones.

I stopped at thirty, placing my palm on her forehead and tilting her head back. I lifted her chin forward with my other hand to open the airway. I listened. *Still nothing!* I pinched her nostrils shut and covered her mouth with mine. The contrast to our loving embraces was an offense, a crime horrible and clinical and desperate. I made a seal and forced air into Ambra's lungs.

Back to the chest. Fifteen more and another crack. *Dear God!* Another breath. Salt water flowed down my face, stinging my eyes. It was almost impossible to keep my vision clear.

"Please, love! Please!"

My words hissed through the compressions of her ribcage. Again and again and again I pressed. I didn't know how long I could continue in the heat.

In the middle of the fourth cycle, she gasped.

"Ambra!" I screamed at her, but she didn't respond. Still, she was breathing! Her trunk shuddered and fell in haphazard movements.

I attached the diagnostic device, and the AI spoke in a calm monotone.

"Ventricular fibrillation detected. Recommend defibrillation. Confirm, please."

"Confirmed!"

"Please clear contact with the patient."

I pulled back, and the element hummed to a charge and sent current through Ambra's sputtering heart. The muscles around the chest wall tightened and striated.

They relaxed.

"Normal cardiac rhythm established."

Synthetic speech rolled out numbers useful for a doctor to

hear. I couldn't process the gibberish but bent down and felt a regular breath from her lips.

My Ambra was alive!

"Advise immediate evacuation to medical facilities."

For the first time in this insanity, I scoured the desert. *It's familiar*. A sand plain of enormous length ran in all directions. In the distance, a tower surged into the heavens. The Sahara. The Temple. *How had we gotten here?*

We were within communications range. I engaged the transmitter and broadcast on all emergency frequencies.

"MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY. This is Nitin Ratava, Captain of the Guardians unit. I am outside the Temple City in sight of the antenna. Ambra Dawn is seriously injured. She needs immediate medical evac. Please respond."

My COM shot back static. I tried to boost the signal and ramped all the power to transmission. "MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY. This is Captain Nitin Ratava—"

"Captain Ratava, roger your communication. We're locating your position. Confirm your message."

"I have the Daughter with me. She is critically wounded."

A sharp crackle in the white noise and a different voice. "Captain, Major Mizoguchi linking in. Where is the rest of your party?"

"Dead, sir." A gut punch. "Killed by enemy forces. Correction: Waythrel of the Xix was kidnapped. Whereabouts, unknown. Status, unknown."

Static on the COM before she continued. "The goals of your mission?"

"A success, but I don't give a damn right now! Ambra's hurt!"

"We have medical on route to your position and have a high resolution visual on you."

"Tell them to burn through their thrusters," I said, seeing a thin line of blood trickle from the corner of her mouth. "I don't know how long she has."

Chapter 46

A man is a god in ruins.

—Emerson's "Nature"

I stayed beside her on the wild flight back to the Temple City. Sands skimmed past, air whistling along the craft. After I had told them all I knew, the medical crew asked me to move to another part of the ship. I refused. They saw my eyes. I kept out of their way, and they ignored my presence.

From their conversation, I gathered her condition was stable. I had indeed broken ribs in my efforts to revive her, puncturing a lung in the process. But her vital signs were strong. They believed with proper Xixian care back in the city, she would fully recover.

Relief hit me like opium. For the first time in weeks, I relaxed and allowed others to take on the burden of crisis. My mind and body slumped with exhaustion. So much had happened, so many losses, impossible revelations and events. The shock was fresh. I leaned against the walls of the hovercraft and closed my eyes.

The opening of the bay doors startled me awake. They sprinted Ambra off the ship to the medical units. I stayed out of their way. She was stable. She was going to be okay. With that knowledge, I let them do their jobs.

Mizoguchi, Mazandarani, and others awaited me as I exited the craft. I sighed, much too tired to deal with anything right now. But I knew they wanted answers. They deserved them.

I froze in my tracks. A Xix stood out among the crowd, its eyestalks a tower above the humans. Its black and phosphorescent colors shimmered in striking patterns. Patterns I'd seen before in the last dream.

"Synphel."

The rest glanced from me to the alien in surprise. It ambled forward and stopped in front of me.

"How do you know me?" it asked.

"I don't know," I stammered, my mind whirling through the confusion of the final traversal. "I think Waythrel said your name. On another world. Another time."

"Waythrel spoke to you of our mating groups?"

Mating groups?

"No." *How do I explain this?* I put my hand to my forehead. I was so tired.

"Waythrel never talked of anything like...mating groups. Seeing you here, I recognized you from...an experience I had on the mission."

"What was its nature?"

"I don't know. A strange dream. I suffer nightmares when I go through those damn Orbs. I heard voices. Many of them. At the end of it, there was Waythrel's voice. You were standing nearby. You were..." I decided not to describe all I had seen. "I was told I'd meet you soon." I shook my head. "And here you are."

By this point, Mizoguchi and Mazandarani had joined, listening in to the conversation.

Synphel bowed to me. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Captain Ratava. You clearly have been blessed with profound experiences in your travels."

"Or cursed."

"Yes, such astounding events are hard to distinguish and are often both." The alien's many eyes studied me. "I recognize that you are weary, but Waythrel is important to me. Please tell me all you know about what happened."

"You're a mate? Romantically involved?" I had no idea what words to use in this context.

"One of them."

"So, you have marriages, divorces? Or multiple spouses?"

"Closer to the latter, Captain. We tend to keep our social behavior private. You, however, are intimately entwined in our stories. I will explain something few of your kind have heard." The Xix let that sink in. It did, but I had no clue what to do with it. "You may have noticed that we do not employ gendered terms when speaking about ourselves."

I shrugged. "Yes. A strange hiccup in your translators."

"Not a hiccup. It is intentional, because to do so would distort our natures. Humans have a dioecious genetic and phenotypic biological mating structure: male and female. There are spectrums of behaviors and physiology associated with this basic average sexuality, a property common to most living systems. Productive human copulation, however, is achieved through opposite binary interactions. We of the Xix do not possess two sexes."

"You're asexual?" I offered, wondering if they budded like yeast or impregnated themselves. I needed to lie down.

"No. We have six."

"*Six?*" I *really* didn't know what to do with that.

Mizoguchi and Mazandarani gawked. This was rare information.

"Yes, with corresponding physiological and genetic differences.

You have male and female, each with distinct bodies and character. Reproductive organs. Biochemistry. We have six. A fruitful mating event is achieved when all six copulate simultaneously. Intimate partnership occurs in binary, ternary, and other combinations for pleasure and companionship. But reproduction requires six."

Now my head was swimming. "I'm not sure I want to learn much more."

"I will spare you the details. But Waythrel and I were different sexes in one such group. In fact, we were a closely associated pair in the combined sexual assembly. Echoing human monogamous relations, we lived extended portions of our lives in each other's presence."

"Married?"

"Not precisely, but the term will do. Does this help you understand why I care so much to discover what befell?"

I thought of Ambra. "It does. Thank you. Let's go to the hospital, and I'll tell you what I can on the way."

The Xix bowed again and moved to the side. I stepped toward the entrance of the medical wing, but Mazandarani darted in front of me. My temper flared.

"Excuse me."

"You are a fortunate man," he snarled, remaining where he was. "The one soul to survive the mission. It's as if certain fates are shaping your destiny." A fire raged in his eyes.

I couldn't believe I had to deal with this. "Sepehr, *not now*. Get out of my way and let me go see Ambra."

"Yes. Your main failure was that she lived. Do you go to finish the job?"

I weighed responses in an instant. Statements, passive or harsh. Varied, expressive silences. After a second of consideration, I threw all pretense of maturity to the side.

I smashed my fist across his jaw, and the Iranian sprawled to the floor. A natural parting of the waters occurred as people

cleared from around us. But Mazandarani wasn't the brawling type. He held his face and the trickling blood coming from his mouth while scowling at me.

So I did more than strike him. My suit was still activated. I reached down, and with the full power of the hydraulics, grasped him by the robes and lifted him into the air. His feet dangled inches off the ground, a shocked but unbowed expression on his face.

"Captain Ratava!" came the imperial voice of Major Mizoguchi. "Put down the counselor, now!"

I was in a state. Blame fatigue, loss, mental trauma, or the ugly insinuations of the counselor. I'd simply had enough.

He spoke through clenched teeth. "Did they pay you to kill me, too?"

I glared at him. "I'd do that for free."

A steady but firm grip squeezed my shoulder. The towering Xix loomed over me like a shadow. "Nothing would pain Ambra more than for us to hurt one another."

My will for violence vanished. I put the Iranian down. Perhaps somewhat roughly, but the alien had rebooted my emotions. It had known exactly what to say.

Mazandarani straightened his robes and bowed to Synphel with some semblance of shame. I spun on my heel and strode out of the dock without a word or second glance.

Chapter 47

Not until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves.

Henry David Thoreau

"You saved my life, Nitin."

Her beauty transcended objectivity. Hair in disarray, eyes bloodshot with dark circles like a raccoon—it didn't matter. It's hard to describe the overwhelming feeling of joy and wonder running through me to see her open her eyes and smile. Speak. Gesture with her hands in her elegant way.

My Ambra is alive!

"I guess it's fifty to one, now. I'm still deep in the red." I tried to maintain a soldier's composure. It was difficult. "I'm sorry about the ribs."

"They'll heal, beloved," she said, smiling again.

I sat in a chair, holding her hand, gazing upon her face like the first time I had seen it as a child in school. The new Xix was present. Mazandarani stood opposite me on the other side of

Ambra's hospital bed. After our altercation a few days ago, the two of us did our best to avoid each other.

"Thank you for speaking with Synphel, Nitin. I've shared with the Xix all the details passed on to their group memory. They'll do what they can, but there's little hope to find Waythrel now. They could have gone to any place at any time."

"The bodies of Fox and Kim? They weren't in the desert?"

"No," said Mazandarani. "A thorough search turned up nothing."

Ambra spoke. "It's my fault. I left them chasing the clone. The portal may have brought us back, but it didn't pick up after us."

The Orb. I had a distinct ambivalence about the object now. All my life, I'd learned the mythology of the Time Spheres. Memorized the legends because they were central in the Daughter's story. Always narratives of goodness and hope. After the terrible events at the Dram homeworld, I'd never see the portals in quite the same way.

"How could it have turned against you?"

Her smile faded. "Oh, Nitin, there's so much I wish I could explain. The gate is something far greater than I, and it has a mind of its own. I've known this, but because my desires had always aligned with it, I took that alignment for granted. Things changed when they took Waythrel." Ambra sighed. "The truth is, the Orb didn't abandon me—I betrayed myself."

"What are you talking about?" How could she blame herself for this?

"You see, I'd worked a lifetime to accept and plan for our losses. Terrible costs to come that you believe in abstractly because you trust my words. I *live* those tragedies. Endless visions. I'm never able to escape them, their pain. I didn't understand how much I'd repressed. Anger. A deep bitterness. Especially after meeting you, and you turned out to be everything I'd envisioned.

My heart was lost to you. To think about that cruel future—I barely held myself together, Nitin."

Embarrassment choked me as she shared such personal feelings. Synphel was one thing—no doubt the alien knew a lot from the Reader sharings. But Waythrel's mate was still strange to me and its otherness provided a distancing. With another human, it was different. With Mazandarani—I didn't like his hearing about our relationship. Nor did he, I guessed. A quick glance at his face confirmed it.

"You seemed so strong. I didn't understand," I said.

She touched my cheek. "I didn't either, or you would have sensed it when we shared. When that thing took Waythrel, something shattered inside me. I hadn't seen this in visions—greater powers hid it from me. A total surprise, something I don't often experience. It was a heartbreaking loss. One I hadn't prepared for."

She nodded, explaining the entire situation to herself as much as to me.

"I lost control. I flew into a mad rage. I abandoned all my efforts in this long struggle, refused to listen to my own prophecies. The clone opened the portal. The Time Sphere *allowed* this. I should have recognized this, accepted it, *understood* the significance. I was too crazed, too rebellious, too *arrogant* in my hurt to let go and take my rightful place. I'm afraid I was beginning to believe in my own mythology." She shook her head. "I tried to change what shouldn't have been changed. The Orb intervened. It showed me my mistakes. It reminded me of my path."

"What are you saying?" I asked, horrified, remembering the terrible visions.

She glanced away from me. "My fate is still unfolding, and I can't see all ends. What happened there is beyond full understanding. For now, at least. Until events reach completion."

The Xix interrupted. "I am grateful to Captain Ratava for sharing his experience in the transit. It may not make sense, but I

believe you heard the voice of Waythrel. How, I do not know. Through the Time Sphere, its awareness reached out to you, and to me, to connect us in our future struggles. I will remember this."

I was unsure how to respond. I certainly didn't feel I deserved such commitment and connection to Synphel. As always, these aliens left me slightly in awe.

I bowed my head and tried to accept the offer. "We all loved Waythrel," I murmured. "Ambra most of all."

"Not more than Synphel, Nitin." Her face dropped. "But, yes, I miss Waythrel terribly."

Mazandarani cleared his throat. "Daughter of Time, I have completed the preparations as you requested. I need your go-ahead for the ceremony." His expression was a mask of strain.

"For what?" I asked.

Ambra's demeanor brightened, and she squeezed my hand. "A marriage. It will take place here in the Temple during a Great Sharing. The Group Mind will be formed to preside over the sacrament. Readers are en route from across the galaxy right now."

"What wedding? Who's marrying?"

Synphel spoke. "The Daughter of Time, of course."

I gawked in shock. Ambra winked at me, a half-smile curling her lip. I turned to the alien, who stood unreadable, and last, to Mazandarani.

"Is this true?" The floor was about to collapse underneath me.

"Yes. Although I sought to prevent it," he said.

"Counselor, you have yet to overcome your possessiveness," said the Xix. "Until you do, you will have no peace."

I didn't give a damn about the Iranian or his tranquility at this moment. *To be wed?* It couldn't be! How?

"I don't understand. Married, to whom?"

"Why to *you*, Captain Ratava, of course," answered Synphel.

Ambra laughed. "Nitin, I won't ask you a third time. Will you marry me?"

Chapter 48

I dive into the depth of the ocean of forms, hoping to gain the perfect pearl of the formless.

"The Gitanjali" by Rabindranath Tagore

The first ceremony we attended was to pay respects to those who had fallen during our recent mission. We had returned with no bodies. No remains. Nothing but the memories we carried for those who had died serving humanity. Sacrificing for life beyond our own species. Giving everything for millions of sentient worlds across our galaxy.

We gathered in the desert, near the spot where Ambra and I had awakened a few weeks ago. A collection of aliens and humans gazed upon a makeshift memorial hewn from the bedrock. Orange and marbled, polished to a gleaming finish, five names were engraved:

Erica Fox
David Kim

Ryan Marshall
Grant Moore
Aisha Williams

Waythrel's name was withheld at the request of Synphel and the Xix. They refused to commit the kidnapped alien to the casualty list, retaining hope that, someday, Ambra's beloved advisor would be found.

In homage to ancient rituals of Old Earth, a flame was lit in an oil-filled bowl beneath the carving. A protective field was set around the memorial, shielding the slab from wind and sand. Servants of the Temple refilled the container each week, trekking the distance in the heat to give their respects.

Ambra stood by my side in the winds, her robes billowing and her hair dancing. She smiled and turned to the rest of the group. "Until we join them again," she said.

I was too consumed with conflicting emotions to parse what she meant. Too often, her metaphysical pronouncements escaped my understanding. I struggled to accept the loss of my team, my inescapable responsibility for their deaths. Command carried terrible burdens. A debt I could never pay.

She possessed a unique perspective of mortality, and therefore, of life as well. She spoke as if the dead weren't truly departed. I wondered if they were still with us in her unusual view of time. Could she still access their essence? Would life and death appear as eternal elements in a single fabric of existence?

I could not share her combined joy and sadness. Nor could I understand her far-flung gaze when speaking of and to those who had passed. My struggles remained unresolved.

We returned to the Temple by hovercraft. Ambra insisted the truest way to honor their deaths was to fully live. So our ceremony would proceed that evening.

Whatever I thought of Mazandarani, he had pushed aside his jealousy and pain at losing the Daughter to me. He planned the marriage as grandly as the Festival of Rebirth. As we approached the inner city, throngs lined the streets. Xix and human. Odd alien species in environmental suits, some remaining in protective craft. Tens of thousands had come from every corner of the planet and from star systems distant. It was a gathering like no other I'd seen.

I wore my military dress uniform. Black coat and pants. The MECHcore red beret, the gear train insignia stitched in gold thread on the front. My captain's bars gleamed, along with honor badges and medals from combat operations. It was an oven in the suit, but I tried to appear relaxed.

We disembarked from the hovercraft at the foot of the long stairway rising to the Temple. Together, Ambra and I led the way up the stairs, Synphel and Mazandarani close, a pack of dignitaries behind them. The crowd queued and followed the procession into the enormous structure.

The mood was festive yet sober. Many of the greatest Readers of our galaxy were present. Their repeated sharings produced a mass dynamic unlike any I had experienced. Perhaps it was a weak echo of the Group Mind she often spoke about. A quiet unity hovered over the demeanors of the individuals. No randomness of disconnected strangers. No empty-headed mob mentality. It was something else, something more than alien. It permeated the surrounding space.

We entered the open expanse of the grand chamber, approaching the chromatic projection. The Orb slice reflected the mood I sensed from the gathering spilling into the room. Gone were the storm clouds present in the terrible conflict at the Dram homeworld. The colors flitted with potential and anticipation.

The patterns suggested in my mind future possibility and a strange sense of hope. Amazed, I wondered how this abstract illusion could shape my thoughts.

Onward we walked, hand in hand, and neared the central dais within the color swarm. Thousands poured like a river through the entrance behind us. Their forms flowed through the chamber, pooling into individual depressions. Little sound escaped beyond their footsteps and the friction of fabric.

We stepped to the prismatic nexus. Ambra spun us, holding our clasped hands into the air as the remainder of the Readers entered. I anchored my gaze on my beloved to calm the anxiety at this subconscious atmosphere of power.

She wore a tailored black robe, the material finer than anything I had ever seen. It reflected the glowing walls of the Temple. Xixian medicine had performed miracles. Her skin radiated a startling white. Her eyes glowed, luminous emeralds beyond valuing. My fingers twitched, desiring to run through her red curls. But we remained still. Stuck in the statuesque position she had chosen to greet the incoming congregation.

It took some time before they settled. Once the last Readers sat, the doors shut to the Sahara, silencing the sounds of the desert. Many assumed positions of meditation reminiscent of Indian yoga. A variety characterized the figures, especially in the alien species present and visible.

Ambra lowered our arms. She gazed across the landscape of contemplation, entering a trance herself.

During these moments, the assembly isolated me. I was the outsider, excluded from the communion of their minds. A talentless grunt dropped within a phenomenon he couldn't understand or partake in.

My dissociation was short-lived. Vertigo unbalanced my grip of reality. A subsonic rumble rose, a bass hum flowing around and diffusing through the stone into flesh. I didn't know if my bones

or my soul rattled. Something unusual unfolded, beyond my experience. The passage of time transformed.

An irrational conviction of presence grew. It reminded me of the intuition one has in the dark, when one isn't alone. Or the certainty a soldier feels in combat when a threat is near. Except the sensation wasn't fearful. This manifestation calmed.

I discerned a personality transcending my own. It permeated space and sense, unlocalized but pervasive. I thought of our ancestors. Isolated in the deserts with little knowledge and nothing to frame such a transcendent experience. I have no doubt I would have ascribed it to the presence of the divine.

We form the Mind.

A voice from everywhere and nowhere. I turned to Ambra. Her gaze was on me, her eyes diving into my own. But the speech wasn't hers. Not from any individual. It loomed beyond us, larger, distinct. Yet it radiated from deep inside me.

We are *the Awareness.*

Waves of warmth and electricity danced through me. Her face flushed, pupils dilated. My breath strengthened, adopting a rhythm. I felt consumed. Tendrils of power reached into me from outside. They penetrated my nervous system, stirring a fire.

Arousal.

The many are One. Now two will be one and of One.

My breathing deepened. Goosebumps covered my forearms and legs. My mouth dried as an erection stirred. Rivers of life flowed through me, summoning my energies. It was frightening. It was a hunger I couldn't possibly refuse.

"Ambra..." My voice was hoarse.

She cooed. "Shall I show you marital bliss, my husband?" She came close to me, her lips parted and engorged with blood, her body brushing mine.

I gasped, panting. "Haven't we already known it?" I wondered, remembering our time outside the galaxy on the sands.

"Not like this."

She undid the gold buttons on the front of my dress coat. I saw a bright passion in her eyes. Her fingers explored my chest through the spaces in my shirt. Her nails scraped against my taut nipples. I moaned, wanting to explode, my eyes swimming. They caught sight of her breasts, the glowing Temple walls, the flashing colors of the portal, the sea of Readers deep in trances.

"Ambra—*here?* With all of them?" But I couldn't resist. There would be no denial. Only full, complete, consuming *desire*.

"Yes, love," she said, her lips on mine, her tongue teasing and a warm breath flowing into my mouth. She yanked my coat and shirt down around my elbows and ran her hands over my swelling chest. "A profound sharing. A Heart greater than any you have known watches over us. It blesses our union while it partakes and augments it."

She pulled me down on top of her.

Chapter 49

His left hand should be under my head,
and his right will embrace me.

Song of Solomon 8:3

She was correct. It wasn't like before.

A swelling in the deep chant evolved into one voice. An articulation synergized of many psyches. Tones low and high. Personalities human and alien, spanning notes and scales and qualities unimagined. The transcendental harmony was multiple yet undivided.

Waves of a celestial hymn washed over us. It fueled our mutual desire, drove it higher as we lay upon the dais. Biology commanded. The limbic broth overflowed. Her eyes drew me deeper into a whirlpool of verdant scintillations.

The Temple disappeared, fading to black. We entwined as a single organism dangling inside the color explosion of a nebula.

My mind, consumed by the mating act and by her eyes, soared within this cosmic artwork. Omnipresent, the light of stars painted the dusts of space toward infinity.

I love you, Nitin. Always. Remember.

Not like before. The tendrils of transcendental potential trickled through me, the collapse after climax transformed. Hunger returned, my physiology altered. The arousal did not decrease but ascended to greater passion.

Her eyes held me. I sensed the question. A request, permission to enter this frightening and uncharted physical place. The biology of sex is raw power. It often wreaks destruction in its intensity to create. She asked me to play with a fire I dimly appreciated.

I gave in wholeheartedly, and not solely from the burning desire churning within me. Also to connect, to become, to merge with the one I loved beyond anything I had known.

Waves waxed to storms. The flame flowed through us. Our bodies cycled from arousal to climax, gentleness to wild passion. In myriad locations in space, we made love over and again. Before a cloud igniting its nuclear fuel. Floating over a frozen sea of methane on an ice world. Watching the dance of multiple systems in accelerated time. We dashed through a dense star field as the dots of light drew into brilliant bands.

Not alone.

A presence observed us from above. Spoke from within us. It enhanced, studied, transported. It loved us in some fashion beyond my comprehension. Surpassing any kind of adoration I'd known. A dispassionate passion. This transcendent otherness transformed the affections of crude creatures like ourselves. Over us flowed a concern mingled with detachment, a celestial devotion summoned from a collective godling.

I was Ambra, and she was I, and we were part of something *other*. Devoid of Reader talents, I still encountered this spirit. The

power of this Being stimulated whatever vestige of that sensory organ I possessed. I couldn't imagine what it was like for the Readers themselves.

My body was now a portion of a greater organism. In this union, our passions continued, and my emotions ranged unrestrained. The overwhelming experience stripped all semblance of artifice, social inhibition, personal restraint. I wept. I laughed. I did both with freedom and completeness. It resolved the age-old mystery of how tears and laughter danced as separated twins. In this realm, they integrated and became one. Joy and sadness as much of a harmony as two human bodies becoming one flesh. Or ten thousand brains assembling into a single Mind.

To describe more of this multipartite reality is impossible. My experiences were of a nature I recall as a sober man would heavy intoxication. Afterward, they dissolved to faded colors of vivid dreams. Ideas hopelessly in conflict and forever out of reach.

The fullness of the universe drifted before my awareness.

Eons passed.

We were alone in her room. The Temple had vanished. The Readers were gone. The lofty consciousness receded as a blurring hallucination.

Ambra slept on the bed. Moonlight spilled over the white skin of her shoulder protruding from the bedsheets. Returning to my senses, I exited the trance.

Exhaustion sapped every cell in my body. I needed to sleep as I had never known. I folded my dress pants, hung my coat, and left my beret on the table. I placed my medals and bars in their boxes. I took the holster with my sidearm and removed the Hertz, closing it within a drawer in the bedside stand.

I lay down on the bed. When my head touched the pillow, it

felt as though the mattress rose and enveloped me. Bone tired, I knew peace for the first time in my life. Remade with a stirring emotion stronger than any I had ever experienced and for which I had no words.

I closed my eyes.

Chapter 50

Men of broader intellect know that there is no sharp distinction betwixt the real and the unreal; that all things appear as they do only by virtue of the delicate individual physical and mental media through which we are made conscious of them; but the prosaic materialism of the majority condemns as madness the flashes of super-sight which penetrate the common veil of obvious empiricism.

H. P. Lovecraft

I drown again in dream.

As the soft morning sunlight of New Earth dances through our bedroom window, I look down on her sleeping. The white sheets are blinding, wrapped around her seductive curves. Her naked shoulder has slipped from the fabric, as scintillating *as the silk—such a contrast to my dark copper. Waterfalls of red curls streaming to her waist color this blank canvas.*

I admire her swollen skull resting on the pillow. The grotesque bulge repulses others, but I know attraction, a pull to touch, to caress.

I walk to the nightstand and open the drawer. In a state of unreal detachment, I remove the firearm. The composite metal should be cold in my hand, but it is not. I feel nothing. The muscles tighten around the handle of the pistol, but I give no commands. I have no responses and sense no contractions or tightness in my skin. I see from a distance, crammed into a vantage point I cannot define in space or in time.

And this automaton, an alien form that is no longer mine, works the weapon. Fingers unlock the safety, orienting the firearm toward the bed. The golem raises the barrel to the elongated head of my beloved. It brushes the scarred edges near her hairline.

She opens her blind, green eyes with adoration. Seeing nothing and everything, they stare into my own. Tears trickle down her white cheeks and I hear her voice in my mind.

Don't be afraid, Nitin. I love you.

I pull the trigger.

Chapter 51

My friend, I am not what I seem. Seeming is but a garment I wear. The "I" in me, my friend, dwells in the house of silence. I would not have thee believe in what I say nor trust in what I do.

"The Madman" by Khalil Gibran

The gun did not fire. My hand pulled the trigger repeatedly, but nothing happened.

Ambra sat up in the bed, her hair spilling over her chest and onto the sheets. She stared at me with a terrible coldness. "We've been waiting."

My mouth screamed. My body lurched forward, my hands outstretched to grasp her throat. I got nowhere, paralyzed, frozen in space. She rose and slipped on a robe, straightening her beautiful locks. The sound of sprinting footsteps filled my ears. Shapes barged into the room, but I couldn't turn to see them. I remained suspended.

"You are unhurt?" a man cried, his speech winded. *Mazandarani.*

"Yes." She glared across my field of vision to the door. "Sepehr, put the weapon down." A short pause, and she spoke with more force. "*Sepehr!* Now. Put it down!"

"He would have killed you!" Such venom.

"Remember not to condemn an innocent," said Synphel. "Nitin is as much a victim as Ambra nearly was. More so. He has lived in ignorance because of our machinations. Show pity, counselor."

Fabric rustled and her face relaxed. "Thank you. Now, place him in restraints. Put him in that chair."

Mazandarani pulled my paralyzed limbs behind me. A crackling buzz indicated the activation of field cuffs. Arms lifted and moved my body backward. They dropped me on a seat, my legs also restrained and bent to a sitting position.

"He's secure?" she asked.

I could see them all in front of me. He nodded.

The paralysis ended. My lips erupted in a string of vile curses aimed at the Daughter. I watched this offense, possessed, caged in a nightmare. A lunatic with a split personality, I cursed my dearest love. I strained to shout, to weep, but I could do nothing. I was a soul imprisoned in the abomination of my own rebellious body.

She held up her hands and my mouth locked. "Enough."

The sewage of profanities stopped. She knelt down in front of me. My limbs convulsed to reach her, to spill the lifeblood of my lover.

She stared into my eyes. "Nitin, it's okay. This will be over soon."

"Be careful, Ambra!" said Mazandarani. "You don't know where he is or what will be waiting for you."

She placed one hand on each side of my skull and closed her eyes, forcing mine shut as well. My body spasmed in seizures of suppressed violence.

"No, Sepehr, they don't know what's *coming*."

What happened next, I tell you through analogy and metaphor. I clothe it in visual images and archetypes because my imagination can do nothing more with the experience. As for what truly occurred, Ambra knows.

The entirety of her essence blasted as a rocket into my consciousness. No, rather into some enlarged space containing what I naively thought of as myself. Except I wasn't alone. Inside this mental chamber, anchored in some way as fundamentally as I, there lurked *another*. Cloaked in shadows, stowed in the back of my being beside a doorway I'd never perceived. The fading apparition slipped behind the portal and vanished.

Ambra's fury rushed in pursuit like a billowing fire. An incandescent dragon propelled past my awareness and through the door. I was abandoned, forsaken in this strange, expanded space. Once my mind. Now, some insane house of mirrors.

Control over my body returned. I opened my eyes. Her face rested centimeters from my own. She continued to hold my head in her hands, her eyes closed, focused, and in some trance. The others in the room observed in tense silence.

"Synphel. *Help me*."

The tall Xixian approached. "Captain. It is not safe to remove the restraints. Do not disturb her."

"Why?" I asked. "Where has Ambra gone?"

"To kill an assassin."

"What assassin?"

"The one lurking within you since the day you were born," said Mazandarani.

Eyestalks spun toward him. Their disapproval radiated.

"The Anti have been busy for centuries," said the alien. "Not only creating clones of the Daughter. Equally audacious has been their plan to infiltrate Ambra's inner circle. To place spies. Among them, to bring to life the perfect assassin. One who could win the heart and mind of the target, placed next to her in moments of

extreme vulnerability. A killer to activate at precisely that point to optimize the probabilities of success."

I trembled, not from the murderous impulses poisoning my form, but from my own revulsion and fear. "What are you saying?"

Mazandarani passed sentence. "You are a deadly pawn, Captain. An experiment in extermination. A monster designed by enemies so vile nothing remains sacred. A grotesque weapon *engineered* to kill Ambra Dawn. Had she not seen through it, you would have succeeded."

"No."

"*Yes*," he spat. "A chimeric Frankenstein composed of three bodies and two souls. A lover's doppelgänger harboring malice and murder behind a veil of devotion."

Synphel interrupted. "*Careful*, Sepehr. You are letting emotions cloud your thoughts. In what is to come, we will need your mind."

The counselor lowered his head.

My words choked in a parched throat. "What does this mean? What's he talking about?"

"A horror, Captain. A diabolic cleverness. Housed on the other side of the galaxy in a future several hundred, perhaps thousands, of years from now. In this place, there is a ring of power plants not too different from what you have seen here. Within the bowels of that coven, two human bodies float in a stasis medium. Feeding tubes and waste management systems maintain these husks. Their skulls are sliced open, and the brains embedded in a dark technology. Casting their spells over this broth are a score of False Dawns, themselves imprisoned in the room, enslaved to support a long-term manipulation of space and time."

A growing darkness reached greedy fingers up my spine, seizing my throat. My sight narrowed from the corners. "How do you know this?"

"The Collective perceived," said Synphel. "It penetrated layers of deception woven around the place. In one of those tanks is your brain, or rather, the proto-organic component of your *mind*. An advanced projection system works through the clones. Together they open a wormhole, connecting a future time and distant location with our here and now. This technology embedded your highly engineered awareness in a developing fetus in India. A process honed by centuries of experimentation and aid from the shadows of the Anti. You are a construct torn between flesh and space, neurons and time."

"Why?"

"Because there is a back door in your head, Captain," said the alien.

Other holes bleed in your mind, Nitin Ratava.

The high voice of a young girl echoed in my thoughts. I shivered, my lips numb, guts churning.

The Xix continued. "A second body, another *person,* was also projected within this physical form on New Earth. It lay hidden for all of your life. *Watching*. Observing everything happening to you. Transmitting back to its masters."

"The spy."

"Yes, but much more. If the time came, if the opportunity presented itself, this back door could open. This invader would seize control of your flesh. Today it happened, nearly to the death of Ambra Dawn."

I stared at the unmoving face of my beloved, my corruption complete.

"I'm the assassin."

Chapter 52

I know faces, because I look through the fabric my own eye weaves, and behold the reality beneath.

"The Madman" by Khalil Gibran

My life crystallized in a tainted mind. The pieces of unexplained puzzles locked into place. Understanding brought despair.

"She *knew*. She knew all along, didn't she? From the moment we met. That's why she came to the hospital in Japan."

"Yes, Captain," said Synphel. "We have all been aware for some time, thwarting the deceptions of our enemies. They were unable to conceal what they had done through space and time, despite employing the powers of their monstrous clones. They undervalued Ambra's vision. They especially underestimated the Group Mind."

"How long has she known?"

"Since you were born," said Mazandarani, "although some of

us have only learned of this recently." Bitterness dripped from his words.

"Because you were too much in love with the Daughter not to take matters into your own hands, Sepehr," said the Xix. "You would have wrecked our careful plans."

A bitter seed sprouted inside me. *Used*. Not by our enemies alone. My Ambra had exploited me, manipulating my life for decades. She had said *nothing*.

"A plan for me."

Synphel continued. "Yes, or rather, for the weapon of the enemy that was your body. We have played them, Captain. We fed them exactly enough veracity to engender a false impression of our strategy."

I stared forward at the face I loved. Her expression was peaceful. Detached.

Cold?

How calculating had she been? How had she hidden from me this truth while we shared our souls? My head swam. My beliefs were a mockery, and reality devastated me.

"Our awareness of your dual nature presented us with an opportunity. You see, we knew the second entity reported everything you heard and saw. We led them to believe we planned to shut them out with the closure of the Orbs. What we did not tell you is that this is impossible. There is no way to fully wall off any portion of the Time Tree."

My mouth hung open. "Those missions were a *hoax?* My team died for *nothing*?"

Cold. Calculating.

"We were all to die if this clone army could not be defeated. Your soldiers' deaths were not for nothing. They helped you and Ambra set the bait. Their sacrifice made the con more convincing."

"What bait?" I felt sick.

"The Anti eventually perceived they could continue to access the New Earth Orb. They were exposed to a terrible temptation."

I understood. The military training spelled out the strategy in an instant. "A final hammer stroke."

"Yes," said Synphel. "Convinced we had miscalculated, they sought to breach our defenses with overwhelming force. To crush us once and for all at the origin point of the Resistance. They withheld their full strength when you unknowingly leaked the mission details to them. Did you never wonder why those engagements at Brax and Hola had no clone contingent? They waited for the ultimate prize to reveal their hand. Your homeworld had to be in the mix."

"Why didn't they have me assassinate Ambra in the desert when we returned? They wouldn't have to make me kill her. Just sit there as she died."

"We are not certain," said Synphel. "Your travels through the Orbs played havoc with the wormhole connection. Nested tunnels, wormholes within portals. It is a complexity beyond anything we've approached in science. It was a terrible strain on you—it must have been much more so for them. Likely by the time they recovered and realized the opportunity, it had passed. They would rather be sure, construct the assassination carefully. Leave no room for failure—they would get one attempt. The final temptation in their ultimate assault plan. If they had assassinated our most able Reader, the one who might stand a chance to halt the horde of False Dawns, victory was assured. New Earth would meet the fate of the old."

"Well, does she?" I asked. "Stand a chance? She told me she couldn't. Was that a lie, too?"

The room blurred in brightness. A white noise filled my ears and faded. My sight returned.

"No," came a voice inches from my face. I startled within the

restraints as Ambra spoke and opened her eyes. "No, Nitin. I can't overcome their numbers."

I swallowed a scream. "Then what's all this *about*?"

She wiped tears from her eyes. "I can't defeat them as I am. So I will become more than what I am."

The alien was silent.

Mazandarani stared in horror. "Please, Daughter of Time," he pleaded, "don't do this thing."

"The assassin is dead," she replied. "I followed the link back to its source. There were multiple clones, like we guessed. I killed them, and I shut down the life-support machinery of the spy."

"What of Captain Ratava?" asked Synphel. The Xix paced with darting eyestalks.

Ambra reached behind me and removed my restraints. She held my hands. "My worst fears. His proto-brain wasn't there. They have him in another location." She winced at the confusion on my face. "I had hoped to free your mind, Nitin. To disconnect it from the flesh of its origin and permanently anchor it in the physical framework here. But I can't. I don't know where your body is. I can't follow your link without them killing you."

"You did for this...assassin."

"They weren't prepared. That's why I acted so quickly. Now, they will know what happened, or figure most of it out. They will take steps."

"What steps?"

"They will kill you. Pull the plug and break the connection."

"Why didn't you come for me first?"

She shook her head. "And leave the killer free to roam your mind while I was gone? He could have broken the bond between your brains and murdered us both at the same time. I had to stop him first. It was the only way. The only hope."

The alien elaborated. "Your core consciousness remains distant. This Earth-brain that has housed it is dysfunctional on its

own. It is a distorted exploitation for their dual implantations. Your full personality resides with them in the other organism. Where they can control it. Otherwise, Ambra would simply break the connection, and you would continue here, as you are."

Confused, I yearned for such a simple solution. A way to extract myself from this diabolical possession. But it was not to be.

"Sadly, given the construct they have created, that action would only leave a neurological shell, not even capable of supporting physiological functions. Hence your physical malfunctions during Orb transit when the connections were destabilized."

The complications baffled me. "Wait. Haven't they been listening in? Don't they know about the trap now?"

"No. I didn't travel along the projection they made to your proto-body, but that doesn't mean I didn't touch it. I've propagated waves down the wormhole to the source. It will disrupt their ability to monitor you. It will wreak havoc with the passage of time in their space. Slow them down. But not forever, my love." She wept and kissed me. "It's a matter of time."

"Before I die." The finality of it struck me at last. "You told me on the beach."

"I'm sorry, Nitin." Anguish twisted her features.

In an instant, I forgave her. I understood the larger context. I experienced a glimpse of the long pain she forced herself to carry. A terrible burden of knowledge.

"I wouldn't make a different choice, Ambra. Not even now." I stroked her hair as she leaned her face into my hand.

Synphel spoke. "It is also only a matter of time before their armada of ships and clones arrives. If we are to complete our plan, we must act now."

I pulled her face away from mine, my cheek wet with her tears. Her lower lip trembled.

"What are you going to do?"

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I am going to

be butchered by my dearest friends," she said with a false smile and bravado. She turned wild-eyed toward Synphel. "I will go through a new hell and a transformation."

My thoughts slowed and stumbled.

She spun back and kissed me. "I've already died in your arms, beloved. Soon, I'll be reborn."

Lines of pain crossed Mazandarani's face, but his eyes spilled awe. "Daughter of Time," he whispered.

Ambra stood and straightened her robe. "And then I will call all souls to me."

Chapter 53

The day will come when, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides, gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And, on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

The first assault struck as we descended from the Temple into the Saharan sands.

A violent vertigo sickened me from inside, a distancing from my body. My legs buckled. Ambra caught me and helped break my fall in the elevator car. We'd plunged three kilometers into the crust of New Earth, heading to a secret center for the final stage of her long plan. I couldn't focus on her explanations. Our enemies were splitting me from my own flesh.

"Nitin!" She slapped my cheeks. The impacts were numbed.

"It has begun," said Synphel. "Captain, this is proceeding faster than we had anticipated. We will do what we can."

Our drop braked, and the wild vertigo stabilized. I could no

longer use my legs, and my arms moved like some manipulated puppet. The towering alien bent down, and with one vigorous motion, lifted me off the elevator floor.

They whisked my failing body off to a ward staffed with crowds of Xixian medics. I didn't have time to process what they were doing here. Or why this secret lair resembled a hospital more than a war cave. I would soon discover the terrible answers to my questions.

Ambra was gone. They wouldn't tell me why or where. The medical staff buzzed around me, a nightmare beehive with their arms and eyestalks. They inserted instruments into my skin at various locations, but I was too numb to feel them. I sat in a peculiar wheelchair, the back of it thick with instrumentation.

I struggled to speak. "What...what are you doing?" I sounded drunk.

One of the medics paused to talk with me as the others continued. "We are trying to counter the separation of your mental waveform from this physical body," it said. As if that made anything clear. "Several synaptic amplifiers are being located at strategic points in your nervous system. These will give you back some portion of your sensation and motor control."

The medic was right—the nerves were waking up. I brought my hand up to my face and touched my cheek. "I can feel it again."

"It is a temporary stopgap, Captain," said the alien. "It will buy you some time until your mind loses the ability to command the autonomic functions such as your heart and lungs. When it happens, your body here will die, and you will be cut off."

What was there to say?

Ambra had warned me of my fate. I had seen the truth of my dual personality. I now understood the astonishing, yet fragile, link I possessed to this time and place.

I didn't understand what was going on. The other medics were clearing out in some kind of mad rush.

"What's happening?" I asked. "Is there fighting already?"

The medic stared at me with many of its eyes. "Has she said nothing to you?"

A wave of nausea swept through me. "No."

"It is best you learn from her or Synphel. I am Rel. I have been assigned to you. I will guide your chair to the operating room."

Operating room?

Events accelerated. I discovered the wheelchair was more of a hoverchair. The alien motioned over the holodisplay floating in front of it, and the device levitated. The Xix exited, and the craft followed, steering through the winding corridors.

Extended, serpentine passages spiraled inward for ten minutes. The mystery of this place deepened as we passed room after room of aliens and humans. Their gazes tracked us through clear panes in the walls. Whenever a glance fell on me, it held sorrow.

"They know me."

"They are the dedicated Readers of the Temple," said the medic. "Tens of thousands more who have swelled their ranks for this final battle. Each has shared in the Group Mind, traveling together with the Daughter through space and time. All have witnessed histories and futures, terrible and beautiful, a million horizons of alternative universes. In these tapestries, they know your story and how it is interwoven with that of Ambra Dawn. They were present at your union."

Inward we spiraled as Rel continued.

"The Collective far exceeds any one consciousness. Individuals retain fragments of memories from the sharing, although they cannot understand the deeper insights of this more profound experience on their own."

"I thought they came for our wedding."

"They did, Captain. It was a joyous and miraculous occasion. A greater purpose called, however."

I strained to move my head to the side where the alien walked beside me. "You're one of them, aren't you? You're a Reader."

"Yes. Soon I will take my place with the others for a long journey. A final journey."

The spiral tightened. The unusual Xixian building materials opened to a bright room. Medics, human, and Xix dashed. Instruments of surgery, equipment, vessels with bubbling broths were strewn about. Not haphazardly, but with patterns I couldn't decode.

The center of the room focused my attention. A huge slab of black material rested in the floor. It was reflective, wet like ocean shale. The greater portion of it plunged underneath the structure. It appeared organic, alive. Perhaps my failing state confused me, but I saw the surface move. It respired and changed shape. The edges interfacing with pure machinery and biological tanks. In the middle of this bizarre creation, I discerned a depression. The negative of a human form. Imprinted like some nightmarish snow angel with arms, legs, a torso, and an extended, dreadlocked head.

In this negative space was Ambra.

Ice chilled my bones, and I shivered. I didn't know what this thing was. I didn't know why she was lying in it. My intuition was profoundly shaken, disturbed, and trying to call to my conscious mind. What's more, it stimulated a sense of déjà vu.

"Bring me closer to her," I told the Xixian medic.

"For one moment, Captain," came the voice of a translator I recognized. Synphel.

"Please."

The hoverchair floated forward. Her eyes were closed, but as I approached, they opened. They held fear in them.

"Hold my hand, Nitin."

Fumbling as my muscles misfired, I reached across the side rests and dangled my arm. She clamped my hand. I'm sure if I had retained normal sensation, it would have hurt.

She suppressed sobs. "See what they're doing to you." My deteriorating state wasn't lost to her blind eyes.

"Ambra, what are they doing to *you*?"

She couldn't meet my eyes. "Very soon, I will not be able to hold your hand."

"Because I'll die."

"Because I will never touch another human being again."

"*Please*—explain to me."

"The cruelest part is how much I need to hold you, my Nitin. The Anti were perfect in steering their Dram sheep. Cruel and heartless in their plans. They designed you precisely for me. Once in a thousand years, two people chance together who are so tuned to attraction and love." She turned to me, a deep, terrible sadness spilling from her green eyes. "The biology for it can be engineered. You chose this creeping death that's rotting you rather than a life without me. Part of me wishes I could make that choice."

"Why, Ambra? What's going to happen?"

She closed her eyes, tears leaking out the sides. "I will live an eternity encased in this living machine. I'll become integral to it, until what was human is long forgotten and I am the nucleus of this ever-growing awareness that will soon be born."

She leaned forward and grasped my elbow, her eyes flying open, a wild expression on her face. Her nails dug into my skin. Trickles of blood ran down my arm, but I felt nothing.

"All humanity lost but for a lingering *echo.* A terrible, unfulfillable *longing* over eons for you, Nitin. To touch you, hold you, love you once again as a woman."

She was shaking. I wanted to reach for her, to cradle her, to kiss the tears away. I could not rise. I could hardly lift my arms. I was a broken shell, helpless to comfort the most cherished person in my life.

"I can't..."

I'll be here. When they take you from me, don't despair. I will come for you. Always.

A voice interrupted. "It is time."

Synphel stood to my side, its eyestalks darting. "The hyperbrane is failing. It must be now."

She let go of my arm. "Take him outside."

"Wait, no!"

Too late. The hoverchair pulled back, and I saw her lying back into the wet rock as the distance between us increased. I fought to move, to grasp something, to stop the chair. If I had the strength, I would have thrown myself off and crawled to her.

I couldn't manage it. I was paralyzed again. My puppet masters across time and space yanked, snapping string after string.

"Ambra!" I screamed, or tried to. My ears heard a weak whisper of her name.

Be strong, Nitin. I need you to be strong for me right now. To wait. Even in death and what comes after.

The medical workers closed around her like sharks in a feeding frenzy. They brought tools. Blood bags. Scalpels, scissors, laser cutters. Wires and cables.

The chair carried me underneath the doorway and out into the hall. A transparent field materialized, sealing the entrance. The hoverchair stopped inside a nearby room. Synphel entered behind me. Major Mizoguchi stood stone-faced, gazing into the operating room.

Mazandarani trembled, his face pale, his form swaying as if drunk. He pressed his face against the glass, his fingers scraping down the sides of it.

He wept.

Chapter 54

God judged it better to bring good out of evil
than to suffer no evil to exist.

Augustine of Hippo

It was what I imagined drowning might be.

I fought to tread water, to keep my awareness in my body, to resist the vortex pulling me into a star-filled tunnel. Away from Ambra.

I was tiring. Each time I dragged myself back, I'd slipped more. My consciousness detached from the surrounding reality. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a haze of light, the corridor of stars opening its maw to draw me in. I couldn't escape it much longer.

My vision and hearing, all my senses, strobed in machine-gun staccato. I second-guessed all I heard. The words made no sense. They were monstrous. Impossible. *Abomination.*

Using all my strength, I formed sounds. I willed my numb lips

to move, squeezing my chest with all my energies to force air through my throat.

"There must...be anesthetic."

Mazandarani turned bloodshot eyes toward me but said nothing.

Synphel approached my hoverchair. "I'm afraid that there cannot be," it said.

"*Why?*" The word came out like a whisper, a harsh sound of a dying man.

"The Dram horde is approaching with its army of clones and dark allies. We are not ready to engage them. To fight them now means certain and swift defeat. Therefore, Ambra stalls them as best she can."

Mizoguchi spoke. "She has been interfering with their attempts to transition to our space and time. It can't go on forever. There are too many forces arrayed against her."

"If she is unconscious," continued Synphel, "if we suppress her neurological pathways, the first loss of control will be in her tumor cells. The barrier will collapse. Their armada will pour into your solar system in our now."

"She must remain awake until the last moments," finished the major.

"The pain...*distract her.*"

The Xix decoded my simplistic phrases. "The Readers are coming. We have placed our hope in the Collective. We gamble that it will be able to support her focus through the suffering. Without Ambra, there is no Group Mind."

"*It's...torture*," I managed.

"Yes," said Mizoguchi, her expression grim. "She has accepted her sacrifice."

Movement distracted me. A tide of figures. Slow like a trickle, but building like some organic tsunami. They poured into the honeycombed rooms. The chambers resembled the floor of the

Temple, with depressions in a grid. The shapes, human and alien, took their seats. Their hands inserted into hollows on the sides. Bands glowing with Xixian tech encircled their heads and midsections.

Synphel saw my clumsy gaze track their movements. "They come for the final synthesis," it explained. "This will be their last home."

The medic had mentioned tens of thousands. They formed an enormous subterranean city of psychics, coalescing around a focal point in the spiral. A giant hive for a Group Mind with my Ambra at its center.

"When the procedure is finished, we will rise into orbit to meet our enemies. Altogether One, united in a fashion unlike any army before."

"You talk," I gasped, exhausted and confused, "like it's a starship."

"That's because it is, Captain," said Mizoguchi.

I'll be here with you, Nitin, until your moment comes. Then you will not see me. And then you will see me again.

Synphel spoke. "They are about to begin."

"No, I can't!" screamed Mazandarani. "I will not watch this!" He put his hand to the glass and stared toward the rock. "Forgive me."

He turned an anguished face away and stormed out of the room. I couldn't turn fast enough to follow his movements. By the time I had moved my head to see down the hallway, he was gone.

The lights dimmed everywhere within the building except for the operating room. I could not see Ambra for the medical staff surrounding her. The gleaming black of the living stone rose above and past the forms tending to her.

The Readers had all taken seats in positions of deep meditation. I encountered a familiar sensation, despite my failing senses.

Perhaps it was due to my strange limbo between two bodies, the matrix of my mind stretched by the Anti. My dissolution primed my consciousness to resonate to distortions in the continuum, mirroring the powers of those around me.

For the first time in my life, I was gifted a chance to see the universe a little as Ambra did. For all the pain and injustice of it—for this reason alone—I embraced it with all I had. I would not waste the gift.

I recognized something I had experienced once before—on the day of our marriage. This time, it was far more acute. It began as an odd vibration. Tremors woke fathoms inside me. Undulating and long, the cycles accelerated. The power intensified. The vibrations transformed into tones, notes, and pitches. They rose and filled space with song.

A chorus of voices. Every voice, a personality. Each was linked in unique harmonies of thought. *Mind songs* growing into mental symphonies beyond my ability to follow. This symphony, like all grand music, had a personality, a mood, a character of its own.

The Group Mind.

It was sublime. It was haunting and stirring. Its beauty transcended words.

In the midst of this glorious arrangement, as the orchestra of thought began to carry me away, Ambra screamed.

Chapter 55

We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

I floated in space, the earth beneath, the sun a searing crystal. The physiology of our eyes had blinded me all my life. How I saw in this novel fashion, what I was, I didn't know. I had no body, only thought and experience. I stumbled upon a god's perspective.

I am here, Nitin.

How? They are...hurting you.

Yes. Below. But it's better to say...We are here.

They flooded me. Thousands of minds. The singular consciousness I had experienced as Ambra fractaled forth. Her personality splintered into faceted shards of a gemstone. Their refracted light projected into multiple dimensions. Undivided. Of one essence and always reflecting back to the nexus of her mind.

The deluge overwhelmed me. I couldn't process all these souls,

their separate and full personalities, thoughts, memories, and emotions. I recoiled.

Don't be afraid.

The voice was hers alone. The others were gone, tucked into the fabric of hidden spaces in this mental matrix.

Where am I? What happened?

You're displaced. You hang by a string to your flesh in the desert. In my trial below, I focused on you too much. I pulled you here with Us, even if you aren't yet part of Us.

Ambra, I can't. There are too many. I want you.

Shhhhhh, Nitin. See—there!—how they approach?

The emptiness between New Earth and the sun shimmered. Like the clear rubber I'd imagined in the Sahara when the False Dawn attacked, space puckered. The vacuum undulated, planet-spanning ripples in a galactic pond. Each impact, as if a pebble tossed, and the blackness filled with ghostly presences. Starships by the thousands, like a plague of locusts blotting out the light.

I felt them. The cyborg clones. Their power over spacetime resonated through me. I could sense their thoughts and feelings, like the scent before a thunderstorm. I tasted the bile of their hatred.

Was it like this in the desert?

More so. You're not free, Nitin. You are mummified in the chains of your keepers. It is like being wrapped in plastic insulation. What you experience is a whisper of what is there.

What I sensed was awful enough.

The shimmering ceased, and space returned to normal. I could feel something *relax*.

Dear Ambra. You're all working to stop them. They're cutting on you, doing whatever they'll do to your body, and you're also out here.

Not much longer now.

Again, the ripples. Stronger. The armada less transparent, their presence prolonged. It was a tide creeping onto the beach.

This wave revealed more. Between the craft, there was darkness. A lack of light staining the emptiness.

It is an unlight, Nitin.

It poisoned the separation between the objects around them, an ink eating the space it occupied.

The Anti. What will you do?

Violence tore within me again.

Ambra, I'm dying.

A wave of sadness disoriented me.

It's a matter of time. It's always of Matter and Time.

Chapter 56

And now I go——as others already crucified have gone. And think not we are weary of crucifixion. For we must be crucified by larger and yet larger men, between greater earths and greater heavens.

"The Madman" by Kahlil Gibran

I crashed back to my New Earth body. *My body*. The sole incarnation I had ever known. And it was not truly me.

Or was it me?

I no longer knew what anything meant anymore. What was real? What could be trusted? I distrusted myself.

Myself most of all.

I was now paralyzed. My vision narrowed to a tunnel. In the hoverchair, angled forward, I saw through the energy field into the operating room.

The medical personnel had thinned. A handful buzzed around the slab. I could still see, but I wished I could not. Better to have perished in space, blind to the reality on Earth.

My Ambra.

Her distended skull was gone down to the hairline. The orange curls were stained with blood, turned black. Her brain—I can hardly describe it. The flesh was splayed out over several meters and embedded in the living machine-rock. The obsidian absorbed it, melded with the gray and white matter, fused its surface to the cells in her body. The giant mass of her spacetime tumor occupied a devoted cup in the dark expanse.

Tubes bathed the tissues in her own fluids and other nutrients. She was sealed in a strange, clear, Xixian material—sterile, climate-controlled.

The procedures had dissected her extremities. Tissue was filleted and distributed across the organic matrix. Cables and wires flowed into the rest of her eviscerated torso.

She could not be alive. It was beyond imagining. Memory slammed through my subconscious like a sledgehammer.

The vision presented by the Orb.

The abomination near Dram was not a metaphor. Not some nightmarish insight into Ambra's soul or that of our enemies. It was a precision prophecy.

"The extreme digits possess a plethora of nerves," said Synphel. "Their connections occupy an extensive representative volume in the brain tissue." Many of its eyes swiveled to me. "I know you cannot speak anymore, Captain Ratava. I will explain what I can in the time you have remaining." It gestured back toward the horror in front of us. "Similarly, neuronal clusters occur in critical tissues. Her eyes, her lips, ears..."

Stop. I blocked out some of its words. My psyche couldn't survive them.

"All are accessed to optimize the synthesis. They are reprogrammed, used instead to communicate with the AI and project to the other Readers. The initial operation was successful. With the help of the Group Mind, we were able to prevent excessive shock to her system. The integration is converging."

They had opened up her entire body like some medical school cadaver, *yet she was still alive*. Conscious. *Without anesthetic.* In an agony I couldn't bear to contemplate. I tracked the cables and tubes extending from the large machinery around her, embedding themselves into her tissues. Her eyelids couldn't close as wires inserted into the sides of her eyes. The irises alone were untouched, staring outward like two green pin lights. She convulsed. The Xix swarmed about her, their distress at her suffering palpable.

"I am so sorry, Ambra," said Synphel. The alien was silent for a moment. "When complete, there will be a phase transition. A birth in multiple dimensions to spacetime fields surrounding her physical body. Our crude mind-linkages will become far more integrated. A single network. An unprecedented meshing of the mental potentials. Combined with an evolving AI, a cybernetic organism unique in our galaxy will rise. A diversified, multifactorial, cognitive synthesis should occur. We don't know with certainty, as it has never been done. Our science fails us at this stage. We aren't sure exactly what we will have made. But it's our one hope to avoid annihilation."

I no longer heard my beloved in my mind. Still, I felt her, unmistakably Ambra. Muffled, distant, torture requiring all her efforts to maintain focus on Earth's defenses.

Mazandarani returned, pale and trembling, as he gazed through the glass. He moved in slow motion. I didn't know whether from his emotional state or my own degrading mental condition.

"Can we go in?" he asked, his voice rough.

"Yes," said Synphel.

He stumbled out of the room and to the door of the operating room. The Xix activated my hoverchair, and we followed.

"Dear Ambra," he moaned, and tore at his desert robes. He

fell to his knees, his hands shaking as he reached up to the splayed horror of her dissected foot.

I could do nothing. I couldn't weep. I could not fall at the feet of my dearest. I felt my body recede. The room bounced below me, returning like a rubber band. The nausea was overwhelming.

WE MUST HURRY.

Her voice was in everyone's mind. In mine, because I heard it. In the others, because everyone responded.

"The synthesis is complete. Our enemies approach." The alien turned to me. "I will stay with you until you pass, Captain. It will be soon. Afterward, I will take my place in this seedship. We will meet again, I hope."

I didn't understand what it could mean. Some Xixian religion with an afterlife? No *after* followed for me. I would die half a galaxy away in a distant future. *Another time?* It was impossible to cut through the maze of complications in the continuum. How could we meet once more? I likely wouldn't have understood, despite Synphel's best explanations.

It didn't matter. The entire facility energized in a startling fashion. I was almost lost. Contact with New Earth fading, but my last memories mixed with shock and wonder.

This time, real vibrations manifested, not some superstring song of meditating Readers. An earthquake. Mantle dissociated from the planet.

I watched from the end of a narrowing pipe. A monitor appeared in the air in front of us. The silent figure of Synphel gestured. The display responded. The view zoomed from space to hover above northern Africa.

The desert moved.

The grains shifted and danced. Enormous fissures erupted as the surface split open. Lines of shadow spread kilometers and connected, forming a rough, jagged shape. Sand spilled down the

growing chasms and was blown high into the clouds from pressure.

The ground rose.

A shard of the Sahara the size of a major island detached from the planet and climbed into the sky. The building housing my dying body shuddered, but nothing fell. Nothing collapsed. The structure was well designed for its intended purpose.

I remembered Synphel's words. Not a subterranean lair. Not a medical facility. *A starship*. A vessel to sail the cosmos with a heart as demented as this universe itself, cradling the dissected and integrated flesh of Ambra Dawn.

In the monitor, the thing rose higher, bedrock blasting out of the parched ground. Solid crust ripped away and ascended toward the heavens.

The view panned back to follow the impossible craft. The Temple and the Six Cities soared undisturbed. The desert left behind roiled with a sudden sandstorm. A giant brown cloud visible from orbit choked the scar beneath the shard.

The mountain climbed. It defied gravity, flaunting any need for an escape velocity. Finally, a bottom to the impossibility, and the rocky behemoth ended in a spear point of jagged peaks. Boulders the size of buildings dropped like meteors from the stratosphere.

We broke atmosphere and entered space, yet nothing seemed amiss. The Six Cities were fine, the people unharmed. Some impenetrable cage protected the colossal wedge of New Earth seeking its fate in the skies.

The dislodged leviathan floated above the blue-and-white marble, a glow bathing the granite. The moon silhouetted the gigantic pillar as a million stars winked in the deep background.

But no sun blazed in front of us. The star had disappeared. Its light blotted out. A wall of darkness materialized and eclipsed its radiance. The blight cast a shadow on our world.

The Anti and their forces had arrived.

Chapter 57

Deep in earth my love is lying
And I must weep alone.

Edgar Allan Poe

I floated.

Not in space. The sensation differed. I drowned in a vile fluid. My prison. My ultimate reality.

I woke, for the first time in the existence of my being, to my real environment. I strained to open my eyes. *Had I ever used them?* After minutes of blind struggle, the foul facts clarified in vision. Truths I had anticipated, but they devastated me.

Liquid surrounded. The transparent sides refracted green lights. Cables plunged into the murky broth and intersected a shape in various locations. Blurred outlines revealed my true physical form. It was an emaciated skeletal frame, too weak to move its limbs.

I knew my brain spilled from an open skull, merged in night-

mare with machines. I shared this terrible fate with my dear Ambra.

In my case, I experienced no pain. I felt almost nothing. I did not share in the agony of her whom they lifted up into the stars on that heart ripped out of New Earth. Her ravaged flesh I would never see again, half the galaxy away, thousands of years ago in events now long past.

The body I cherished and was born to love.

I told you when I began this story that I was made to love Ambra Dawn. Can you see it now? Can you see the deep, horrible truth of it?

Questions assailed me as my death crept through this grotesque murk. What could such love mean? What value could there be in it, knowing how it had come to be? Can the foul be fair? Can purity exist in the heart of complete corruption?

A diseased tissue was healthy only in a madman's mind.

For my mind's receptacle on New Earth, they had identified ideal genetic stock. Background, alleles, phenotypes studied, predicted, modeled in their human slaves. The body responding most to her appearance, pheromones, MHC sequences. The flesh that would reciprocally stir her sexual and emotional centers. My avatar was chosen to seduce and be seduced.

They took no less care with my personality. After centuries of testing on False Dawn clones, they determined the probabilities of her preferences. They engineered a disposition certain to capture her heart and mind. They tuned my brain in this demon's lair to enhance the perfect character traits. They imprinted its neural pathways with her image, voice, and movements.

The little child couldn't but adore her. The grown man lost himself in her.

They erased a nascent soul in a womb to implant this poisonous Janus. Two-souled, murderous, and camouflaged. All for a premeditated massacre spanning millennia and parsecs.

What can love possibly mean when it has been completely, coldly, cruelly engineered for manipulation? For *murder*?

Seeing this truth, the greater picture came into focus. What did any of our feelings signify? We are an organic soup to be stirred and heated at the will of monsters. Our ideals, thoughts, insights, deductions? They, too, derived from this same blood-bathed cellular clump of delusion and betrayal.

How could there ever be faith in anything but the cold indifference of the cosmos?

The blurred shapes outside the tank moved. I didn't need to see the outlines, so similar to my Ambra's, to know clones surrounded the structure. Synphel had lectured me. I had no curiosity to test the alien's hypotheses. Revulsion ate through me. An extreme repulsion at the execution of this existential crime.

Thus, I floated, as helpless here as I had been on New Earth during my last moments there. Thousands of years ago, the failing body of Nitin Ratava died, that compilation of cells dangled above the planet as an enemy armada closed in on all the things I had ever loved. I lay immobile as our trusted allies hacked my beloved apart and fit her into cyborg machinery, all to stop the death fleet of a ruthless foe.

Centuries in the future, I didn't know what had happened in that final battle. I didn't know if New Earth still existed, if humans had been exterminated, or if my lover survived. I had no power in this dark circle of hell to find out.

So, I floated.

I waited for the demons to shut down this growth pod. For them to kill me, once and for all. I watched these monsters move like underwater divers through the molasses of spacetime Ambra had flooded around them. She and Synphel had at least promised one thing: my death would come soon.

I was glad for it.

However artificial, corrupt, and duplicitous, the truth is I

loved Ambra Dawn with all my heart and soul and mind. Whatever meaning those empty words held. Breeding, genetic design, centuries of optimization, multiple bodies, it was a rushing noise to the reality of my experience.

Nothing had unmade my adoration, including the realization of the mockery and unmeaning of my feelings in a dispassionate universe devoid of purpose or affection. Nor could I unmake it, even if I had wished to. My awareness pulsed as brightly for her in these last moments as it ever had.

Except she was gone. They had shut out her voice. I was left alone with my final thoughts in this dank tomb, surrounded by my captors. My creators. Soon to be my executioners.

Well, what of them? All that mattered to me was Ambra. Without her, I was lost and emptied, forever seeking the one I was constructed to adore. And so, I welcomed the peace of death.

A sharp rumble interrupted the hum within the tank. *Silence.* The incessant bubbling of oxygen ceased. The green glow faded.

And I felt it. My body thrashed at the loss of the essentials it needed to live. Feeble beyond imagining, my limbs twitched. A final reflex to alter the environment. The programming of cells to change the surroundings killing them.

My mind plunged down a mineshaft, endless and smooth, all illumination extinguished.

Chapter 58

Though my soul may set in darkness, it will rise in perfect light; I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night.

Sarah Williams, "The Old Astronomer"

I embrace this darkness.
It drinks my life, and I am not afraid.
No gloom can challenge such vacancy. Fear itself cowers in her absence.
I will wait.
Because there must be more.
Because I trust in her last words.
When this unlight consumes me,
The eon of nothing will unbe before it began.
Dispelling the void, there will be a Light.
The Dawn: and I will follow it and find my love.
That glow will come from Ambra.
That lumen will be of Ambra.

Because that splendor in the emptiness could be nothing else but Ambra.

I wait for you, my love.

Chapter 59

There is no death, only a change of worlds.

Red Cloud, chief of the Oglala Lakota

Nitin.

In the deepest pit of nothingness, after a timeless eternity, she spoke.

Wake up.

An infinity of stars blinded me. I tried to turn away from them but could not, having no form, no flesh. I was sighted without eyes, an awareness adrift in the vastness of space.

Don't be afraid.

Where am I? What *was* I? I did not speak with words. I communicated with thoughts. Lacking a body, I didn't know what was speaking.

See the moon, dearest?

Her voice guided my vision. A blue-and-white marble rivaling New Earth loomed before me. It circled an enormous gas giant of

swirling, banded colors. More moons, many Earthlike, scattered around the titanic world.

That is where you died.

Memories surged. My life. My *lives*. An existence I'd believed to be true: Nitin Ratava, Indian soldier, devoted seeker of the Daughter of Time, lover of Ambra Dawn. The actuality dooming me—chimeric monster, spy, assassin, and puppet. Adventures through space. The deaths of my team. The unforces of the Anti. War. Great and terrible slaughter and sacrifices. The torture of my beloved. My death distant from her.

And where you are reborn.

Reborn? I existed. But as what? I never understood the talk of mental spacetime matrices. The strange idea that physical thought was some field, like electricity. I was never a scientist.

Think of it as your soul, Nitin, if it helps.

I wasn't sure it did. It was an ancient term, better left in the detritus of our superstitious past. Souls pacified the isolated, the old, the needy, such as my mother, who prayed to her icons. Was it appropriate for the cosmos of humans and aliens I knew?

And yet, the mythology provided a structure to frame experiences beyond my understanding. One integrated into concepts of rebirth, eternity, and personality. After everything I had seen, after being so humbled and destroyed, when it was clear I did not remotely understand the nature of existence, who was I to reject the notion of a soul?

Ambra, where are you?

I am reaching across a bridge, a long link from my time and place to yours. Already, where you are, it's many centuries past the age you left me.

I tried to digest the words. She was traveling through space and time to reach me. Why didn't she simply come here from this era? Unless she could not. I had lost touch with her and New Earth as the Dram armada arrived. What if...

Are you alive in this time?

Yes. And you are with me.

I didn't comprehend how this could be possible. Could I be in two places at once?

We are busy, Nitin. All of us in making something wonderful.

All of us? What do you mean?

Several huge spacecraft sped past my center of awareness toward the blue moon. They were enormous, city-sized vessels, one after the other in a parade. Militarized, their forms screamed of violence. Dark shadows surrounded their hulls.

The Anti! Ambra, what do I do?

You are safe. They cannot see you. The clone aboard could, but her attentions are elsewhere.

The procession continued, one by one, until they passed and shrank to a point near the Earthlike satellite. None altered course. No attacks or reconnaissance efforts. It was as if I weren't there.

How do you know all this?

It is difficult to explain. So much has changed. Everything I've been through has been for a purpose, and that goal has been realized. Is being realized. Will be realized. We are augmented. Integrated. Synergized beyond our most optimistic hopes. We are something new.

I still didn't have answers. *Who is we, Ambra? The same as I felt above the planet with you?*

More. Vastly more.

I couldn't imagine. The deluge of minds had drowned me.

Don't be afraid. It won't be like before. You're free of the fleshy egg that gestated your soul. Your consciousness propagates through space and time independently now. The shock and pain from the many—it won't hurt you now.

What if I don't like being with them? What if I want to be alone?

Do you want to be alone, Nitin?

No, I did not. But I also knew dealing with others was often difficult. Clashes of personalities, different priorities, agendas. The thought of joining some mental aggregate frightened me. I wished to be with her.

You will be with me. Because they have chosen to be with me, they are in harmony with me. You will find them acceptable. Believe it. Trust me, my love. Try.

If I don't?

We cannot be together. My future is determined by my choices, beloved. Even if I tried, I could not leave. If you do not join us, you will not be with me. If you persist out here alone, without support, it will be worse than death. You will spend eons devolving. You will lose coherency, and I will lose you forever.

Losing myself was inconsequential. Losing her was everything. The one truth was that I could not continue apart from her. Whatever she now was. Wherever it was. Whatever was in store for me.

I cannot abandon you, Ambra.

Yes, my Nitin. I know. You had to know for yourself.

There's so much I still don't understand.

Stop deducing. Let me show you!

How?

Follow my voice, and it will take you to me. Together we'll dance with every mystery.

Perhaps all this was madness—the last throes of a dying brain's hallucinations. It didn't matter. In life, in death, in lunacy—I would accompany her. I'd believe her. Because, in the end, the core of all my love for her was unshakable, unwavering trust in her.

I'm coming, Ambra.

Chapter 60

Individually, we are one drop.
Together, we are an ocean.

Ryunosuke Satoro

I accelerated.

It was a matter of will, of acceptance. I focused on her voice. The powerful presence of her personality electrified me across kiloparsecs and centuries. Rebirth redefined the remote.

The stormy gas giant and its blue moons receded. The radiance of their star faded. The background of the Milky Way shifted in colors. Stars elongated, running through a spectrum from violet to red in my peripheral vision.

The forward acceleration twisted. Rotating, a vortex of constellations formed until the lights ran together like wet ink in a rainstorm. The eye of a storm. A spherical glow expanded in size. An infinitely layered majesty eclipsed my perception.

The Orb.

I perceived the cosmic sphere with the insight of my bodiless awareness. Stripped of the filters of flesh, it wasn't a portal or a geometrical phenomenon. Not an artifact.

It lived. It possessed a mind of its own. I faced a being of such complexity, alienness, and godlike stature that I comprehended almost nothing of it.

Still, I identified affection. Concern. In the midst of this terrible consciousness of incomprehensible indifference, there beat a heart of empathy.

And it reached for me.

I was drawn through a thousand corridors of brilliance. This time without pain, no confining tunnel or prison, no fear. Joy, wonder, and anticipation flowered in discovering the grail after a long and taxing quest.

Ambra!

I called. My own thoughts echoed like sound. They reflected and transformed. A million different voices uttered the word in response. Their counterpoint recombined into my own tones.

A host.

I felt them. Around me, inside me, in mental dimensions I couldn't imagine or reach, yet present, aware. They anticipated my journey with delight.

Starlight. Looming and bright, a golden radiance bathed space. I raced past several gas giants. A blue-and-white disk maniacally rotated, featureless and blurred. A solitary moon spun about it. The revolutions slowed, stopped as the sphere came to a standstill.

New Earth.

The transit ended, anchoring me in time. A planetary system I remembered from...*before*. I drifted toward a hulking asteroid orbiting the world. Approaching, I recognized the shape. It was the desert-shard ripped from the heart of the Sahara. The sand plains of the Temple and Six Cities gleamed unhurt at its apex.

In this reborn state, my perception broadened. The bedrock of

the planet dissolved. My awareness penetrated into the core of the starship.

I stumbled upon myself—the entity I once was. A body clinging to life, propped by Xixian technology, with a link over impossible distances through time and space stretched to the snapping point. Nitin Ratava struggled to remain present. He watched the giant shard-ship ascend, his life in that false husk moments from ending.

But there was so much more to see than the shell of my former self. Tens of thousands of glowing consciousnesses wrapped in fleshy garments waited. The tendrils of their awareness mixed and united, integrating at the center of the rock.

There, a tortured flesh lay dim in the core of a resplendent shower. It wove the threads from myriad minds into a single, synergized consciousness. A tapestry so massive, so intricate, so *alive,* my spirit shook.

Tearing my focus away from this transforming aggregate, I was able to perceive the nexus underneath. White, human skin. Red hair. Green eyes aimed in the direction of my vantage point.

"Nitin."

She murmured with the dysfunctional meat of her body, through lips I had once kissed and adored. I could no longer touch them, and a distant echo of me yearned to do so again.

Yet, I was becoming something *else*. Dwarfing the faint reverberation of previous passion was the joy and desire to embrace a quintessence invisible to me in my material state. Ambra Dawn transcended the woman I had loved, had misapprehended, had torn down to human stature. I beheld now the maturing synthesis of a goddess.

So are we all. You will understand soon.

I missed you.

The face on her supine form smiled.

And I missed you. Come to me.

My awareness floated the final distance and hovered inches above her body. All was as I had last seen it, the stripped flesh and remade nervous system now one with the starship. Now I could see the effects of this sacrifice in the distortions of space and time. Her tumor served as a multiplicative transmitter. Her entirety, the corporeal dish. The thousands of Readers interwove with her thoughts.

Closer, my love.

I passed through the ghostly essence of her shattered incarnation. The fullness of her consciousness enfolded me in a manner unlike anything I had ever known. As partners of the flesh, I couldn't have imagined any joining more intimate, more overwhelming, or more transfiguring. Yet it was an echo of what could be. The depth of the sharing that could exist between souls clarified. It was complete, and so joined, an *us* greater than the separated two.

And not two, beloved.

The host opened itself to me. This time I had no fear. I wasn't overwhelmed. I *became* with them. An unusual structure centered on a binary awareness at the core. Or rather a singular consciousness of the Daughter and my own orbit around her. We connected to thousands of other minds. Their perception, their thoughts, their personalities swept through me. I encountered each of them profoundly, beyond what any two material prisoners could ever accomplish. Free of confusions and barriers. Filled with compassion and interest. With love.

There will be time for so much learning, Nitin. Now, there is a task to complete. Clear your vision and let the Group Mind see for you.

Let *it* see? I stopped focusing on the myriad, amazing entities. I relinquished my grip on controlling my own perception. The static of multiple beings cleared. A single perspective replaced the individual visions.

This eye into space gazed from outside the Saharan-shard. It focused on the regions beyond the planet. The power of this being, the *otherness* of it, humbled me. The awareness transcended my experience. In many ways, it was alien in its thought processes to my simplistic mind. Yet I shared of it. I was part of it, my own consciousness contributing to its composition.

To my surprise, I saw a fleet of ships from New Earth Force. Alongside them, hundreds of craft of Xixian make. I marveled that these forces existed. I had had no inkling of them before I died.

We hid them from you, my betrayer.

The hurt had faded in me. My soul smiled.

We had set a trap. We told you nothing, and I masked your vision during your time outside your body.

I understood. A brilliant strategy. If indeed they had the power to defeat the Dram and Anti.

Turning back to the coming battle, I noticed the ships of the Xix had no armament. Instead, they projected intense field defenses to deflect beam and projectile weapons. The Force armada was armed as I remembered. Xixian-designed ion slingers with a flux far beyond those of our MECHcore suits. Missiles, conventional, and, more commonly, nuclear. With several hundred warcraft in position, they had enough firepower to obliterate all of New Earth's cities fifty times over.

So much power. So many soldiers of different races and worlds.

All doomed.

Chapter 61

Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt.

Sun Tzu, The Art of War

The blackness undulated. Thousands of warships bent and blurred, the twisting of space ceasing at the moment of my death. The enemy armada obscured the light of the sun.

New Earth sat like a small child before the pounce of a lion. Warcraft fired on the global defenses. Destruction ranged across both fronts as weaponry fragmented opposing vessels. But their military advantage was significant, and they weren't alone.

The tide turned in favor of our enemies in short order. Massive waves of spacetime distortions and antiparticle projectiles impacted our forces. False Dawns and the Anti, hidden in their ships and between the armaments of the Dram, unleashed a fury. Neither the Xixian shields nor our weaponry could counter the onslaught. Within minutes, the sum of our planetary ramparts lay

in ruin and wreckage. A hailstorm of debris orbited New Earth and rained down as flaming meteors.

They shifted their weapons downward. Plasma artillery and missiles ripped fire and destruction across cities on the surface. Soot blackened the skies. Their ordnance unloaded on us as well, but to no effect. The warships abandoned their assault on the impregnable shard, concentrating on maximizing the slaughter below.

The decimation spawned a phenomenon I had not anticipated. The mental matrices, the *souls* of humans and Xix separated from their flesh in death. Isolated, these spirits wandered naked in the fields of space and time. I could sense their emotions and thoughts. Bewilderment, panic, and wonder characterized their awakening to a new reality. And waking, they turned to the light.

One after the other, tens of thousands, millions came to us. Uncountable masses of awareness flowed like some swollen stream into the sea. I gasped at a flux of energy. An essence reached toward them from the Mind. I did not individually will it, but *We had*.

Ambra spoke in my consciousness. *The first, Nitin. A small gathering. A test and a change.*

What's happening?

Something wonderful.

The spirit matrices soared to us. The first, a few intrepid souls. Afterward, a flood. A torrent of mental energies and persons from that river of released beings swelled our nascent pond. The incoming flow dwarfed the growing lake. They joined, and the We grew. It expanded astoundingly, the group awareness absorbing and integrating these hordes. From ten thousand, we became hundreds of millions. The Collective multiplied.

Not all approached. Of those who did, not all stayed. Some drifted toward the Dram, the False Dawns, the Anti, but had no manner of joining them in their betrayal. Others spurned all

sentience and wondered into the void. But the majority united with our nascent community. While our foes continued their merciless onslaught, the avalanche accelerated. As they struck down the lives on New Earth, they made us stronger.

Despite her explanations and witnessing this astounding synthesis, my individual conscience squirmed. Alarm and acceptance fought inside me as the Group Mind sat stoically in the face of this massacre. A conflict raged between my isolated empathy and the transcendent intellect.

Acquiescence prevailed. My anxiety dissolved, replaced with a serene calm. The spiritual assembly conveyed the greater purpose my limited thoughts struggled to grasp. I watched the slaughter, the freed souls, and their blending into the Collective with a diabolical peacefulness. While part of me rebelled in discord, it was a minor portion of my processes. The remainder waited in anticipation.

The time has not come.

Not my thoughts, yet in my thoughts. Not Ambra's thoughts, but of her thoughts.

My awareness turned to our enemies, and I apprehended them with the eyes of the Whole. Thousands of refulgent candles hid in ships around us, their glow poisonous in the fabric of spacetime. The False Dawn army. They released a coordinated barrage of mental assaults on our starship. Against the Group Mind.

It was like a series of nuclear blasts. The attacks before shown to be a faint whisper of the aggregated power these clones possessed. With my enhanced eyes, I discerned massive distortions of space and time. They outshone the radiance of the energies and fields of the sun. All directed on the little rock Ambra and the Readers occupied above New Earth. The False Dawns had perceived what we were.

I was to see they understood it as little as I. Despite the cataclysm in the surrounding continuum, the desert-shard hovered

untouched. The Group Mind unmoved. It watched. It waited. And its patience was rewarded.

The Anti attacked, and this time, they weren't hidden from me. The eyes of the Collective clothed them in shapes and hues inverted yet similar to our own. Flooding toward us from the spaces between the ships came ten thousand craft. The starships were constructed by intelligences divergent from our own. It was difficult to process their structure and purpose. Their energies were vast. They loosed a river of particles at us.

Explosions rocked the outer regions of the atmosphere. Matter and antimatter converted into pure energy. Enormous amounts of radiation blasted outward, hotter than the surface of the sun. New Earth would return to ash.

The Mind moved.

It spun from nothing, mammoth fields of potency countering the particle beam. Tentacles surrounded the antimatter and shielded the planet. The Orb flashed. A stream of power funneled toward it from our location and disappeared into its blazing maw. Silence and ships drifted beside our rock.

The attacks from the cyborgs ceased. The Collective penetrated their meager mental matrices. The distortions in their forms indicating distress. Confusion. Similar anxiety emanated from the consciousnesses in the Anti fleet. Into their bewilderment crept a fresh emotion. *Fear.*

The False Dawns responded with a last and desperate gambit. All their attention focused away from us, away from the planet. The clones centered their power on the moon and our satellite changed course. Its orbit was perturbed. The mass spiraled inward from energies too enormous to contemplate.

A thousand cyborgs pulled the moon toward New Earth. The resultant cataclysm would overshadow the Unmade Calamity. It would be our world's redestruction.

The Group Mind moved again.

My dissolving ties to my old body still painted my awareness in physical terms. That is why it struck me that two god's arms reached from the shard to our moon. Titanic hands tore loose the shackles of the clones from the rocky sphere. They slung them through the fabric of the continuum, away from the planet. The chaos hurled thousands of Dram and Anti ships across the solar system. The spacetime distortions shattered and rended their occupants.

We stopped the inward spiral of the moon. The mass returned to its orbit, unshaken, undamaged. Tranquil beside New Earth. Once again, a panicked sense of awe and fear escaped the ranks of our enemies. But the Mind had more impossible things yet to do.

Tentacles snapped to the asteroid belt. Gargantuan objects returned in the muscled limbs of the demigod in orbit. The names echoed in the mind songs. Ceres, Pallas, Vesta. The preposterous appendages gripped them in a vise.

The terrible hands squeezed. The god-digits crushed the rocks, exploding them in a microsecond. The entity caged the particles, none leaping outward or escaping its grip.

Forming a celestial shotgun, the pellets were flung at the enemy armada. The projectiles blasted at speeds unfathomable for any known military mechanism. The result was utter devastation. The Dram craft, with thousands of clones scrambling to deflect a billion bolts of death, disintegrated. The matter-antimatter collisions with the ships of the Anti detonated colossal explosions. Once again, the churning detritus was channeled to the Orb.

The greatest fireworks display ever witnessed in our locality ceased. The space between us and the sun clarified. No trace of any starship near New Earth remained, friend or foe. All had been reduced to atoms or energy and funneled out of the solar system.

Vanished into the void.

Chapter 62

In the region of nature, which is the region of diversity, we grow by acquisition; in the spiritual world, which is the region of unity, we grow by losing ourselves, by uniting.

The Sādhanā by Rabindranath Tagore

I gazed across the span of space where thousands of starships had orbited. The Dram and Anti annihilated. Not so much as a fragment of metal floated.

In the distance, the Orb. Once, as a man limited by his eyes, I had perceived a thin surface on the Time Sphere. Dim. Bland, but for that one transforming nightmare of Ambra.

Now it blazed with light indescribable, revealing labyrinthine layers. The depth of it made the universe small.

Now begins the Gathering of Souls, Nitin.

The Collective grew. In size, but more significantly, in profundity, power, sentience, and vision. Its awareness penetrated greater distances as well as deeper through time. Backward to the past,

forward to the future. The minds freed in the battle integrated, and our splendor swelled.

There has been a terrible waste. Losses upon losses. Millions of species in our galaxy, each with a trillion voices. Silenced as their song died within the void. Spirits who now hear a call. Our *call.*

And the souls came. From nearby, and across astronomical spans. Over vast spans of time. Not like the flood during the massacre on New Earth. They trickled, as if the separations in spacetime had dimmed our image in their minds. And yet they felt us, had sensed us, will perceive us, glimpsing our shadow through the continuum.

They have or will be following the call.

Her voice. Our voice and thoughts.

My augmented sight confused me. From the harvest of these spirits aggregating about us, I focused on the island of rock the Collective occupied. It had metamorphosed. The numerous intelligences functioned as mental building blocks. The cognitive matrices interwove. The Group Mind conducted these instruments as a symphonic orchestra.

Tendrils, multidimensional tunnels, cosmic portals. They propagated from the core of the Earth-shard. They interlaced about the stone-and-sand plains of the Six Cities and Temple. A self-aware net of writhing filigree engulfed our rocky starship, nesting it in a latticework of light.

I gawked at this growing wonder. I glanced back to the Time Sphere, the grand power of our solar system, the projection of the One Orb manipulating every macrocosm maintaining sentient life. I returned my glance to our Gathering and its cornucopia of complexity.

An odd vertigo befuddled my mind's eye. I experienced a bewildering reference frame confusion.

Was I coming or going?

Did I approach the gateway to the stars that had changed the history of the universe? Or was I flying away from it?

Was I gazing to our transforming Collective or back at the Orb?

Back and forth, with no privileged perspective. I could no longer differentiate. I could no longer see.

What was the Orb and what was We.

Epilogue

Of the theme that I have declared to you, I will now that ye make in harmony together a Great Music. And since I have kindled you with the Flame Imperishable, ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will. But I will sit and hearken, and be glad that through you great beauty has been wakened into song.

Ainulindalë from *The Silmarillion,* J. R. R. Tolkien

Once, when the Daughter was a shadow of what We would become, it was hard to reach you. Reaching you now is so simple, although the consciousness of your author is wholly inadequate for the task of conveying our narrative.

I should not place so much blame on him. It is nonsense to ask a wingless bird to fly, and a single individual of our imperfect and undeveloped species could not hope to explain the essence of our tale without tragic fumbling.

I also find my voice in his mind inconsistent. At times, espe-

cially when reflecting on my incarnate life as a man, I speak in a simpler, individualistic dialect. At others, swept into the complexities of our communal synthesis, my words are the abstracted mélange of billions. The reader cannot help but feel disoriented. The art is doomed to incoherence.

But Ambra wished our story told. An echo of her human love for me. She desired for many, including those in our distant past, to hear of our triumphs and tragedies. So you might listen for our call. That when your time has come, you will search for us in the endless void.

Our Collective was One with this sharing. Thus, you approach the end of this absurd book. An outrageous narrative finished—or, rather, at its beginning.

So much has been lost it cannot be quantified. To consider the fullness of sacrifice unmakes my individual cognizance. Yet *We* rejoice. We celebrate the calamities and creations. An eternity awaits. Our Community will traverse the cosmos through a succession of ages within eons.

We keep an extraordinary and growing company unlike any our galaxy has ever witnessed. At each moment, in every point in space, we evolve. The mental matrices freed by death find their way to us. Most will join our Collective. They add new voices, unique and strange insights to an intellect now beyond anything else in our universe. The others will drift, spurning our invitation. Alone and unanchored, the boundless eternity of creation will drive them mad. Their souls will lose coherence, absorbed into the undulations of the void.

The eye of our Mind no longer sees the linearity of time. It views the continuum from a perspective I will describe (inaccurately) as *outside* our cosmos. In this view, causality is understood as multifactorial. Each point in spacetime affects and is altered by every other. As we Become, we have increasing access to all places and all times.

We gather the harvest sown across distances vast and periods immeasurable. We seek the souls loosed from their corporeal prisons. We provide a haven, a shore upon which they can find harbor in the empty chaos of the vacuum. Among the purposes of the Group Mind, there is no other more sacred. Nothing holds greater meaning than this cosmic search for sentience. To preserve it, save it, augment it, and give it immortality.

Individually, or in mass cataclysm, near and remote, in the past and future, we reach them. We call them. For the most part, they come. From forms of flesh wildly disparate, with mentalities more diverse. Each addition, every new scale in the musical registry enhances the expression and depth of the Whole.

We began with beings similar to ourselves. Such minds we could identify and locate in our early development. Human, Xix, Brax, Dram, Sortax—the list goes on. We were able to find our loved ones. Families, children, and friends.

The MECHcore team of the entity once know as Nitin Ratava came as well. Erica Fox, David Kim, Ryan Marshall, Grant Moore, and Aisha Williams. When they arrived, it was as if we knew them for the first time. The veil between each consciousness had fallen. This narrative is shaped as much by them as it is by me —it is the Mind reaching you now.

Yet in all of our searches, a perplexing mystery remains—we have been unable to locate the soul of Waythrel of the Xix. Many elements of the early Collective find deep meaning in this search. So it has ever informed the efforts of our community.

Our failure to detect evidence of Waythrel in life or in death raises one of two possibilities. The first is that the Xixian Reader is far removed in space and time, and we do not possess the strength to bridge that gap. As we contact you now, it implies a distance beyond our local group of galaxies and more than ten million years into the past or future. The second possibility is that

Waythrel is hidden by forces that can contend with the Group Mind. Both hypotheses can coexist.

The solution to finding Waythrel in both cases is to enhance our powers further. In this way, we will be able to cross the space-time gap or overcome its concealment. Therefore, this lesser purpose in locating a single spirit harmonizes with the gathering of all souls.

Imagine the integration of psyches across millions of worlds. Not at any particular time point, but at all of them. Over a quintillion in our galaxy alone. The Entity awakened above New Earth that dispatched the Dram armada was an infant. Ignorant, wide-eyed and empty, it could hardly speak. Walking exceeded its undeveloped capabilities. Now we approach an early adolescence. Our faculties lie far beyond the imagination of that newborn child.

We are become greater than what we are. Individually, it is a labyrinthine filigree of separate sentients. Each sharing thoughts. Personalities flowing through and around awarenesses, ever learning and changing and giving. It is a loving harmony. Beings who cannot integrate always detach and seek their own way.

We are a multicellular organism composed of tissues of thought. Individual personalities mimic the neurons in a fleshy brain. They are intricate, filled with millions of internal processes. They extend thousands of external communications with our neighbors in this grand Collective.

But the mental synthesis of the Group Mind transcends that between a neuron and a brain. What does a single cell understand of the most complicated human thought? And so, what can any one of us comprehend about those cogitations of the Group Mind? Labeling this Entity's states "thoughts" distorts and over-simplifies. Activities available to a neuron—biochemistry, signaling, secretion—are elements unsuited to describe brain modalities. The actions of the Group Mind are thus beyond our ability to conceive.

We know this. We experience it. We see the awesome powers of what we have become. We do not apprehend them. Faint echoes of higher accomplishments trickle down to us. Visions bathe us. They modify our minds as the human brain's responses to stimuli alter individual neurons. But like the sole cells, our consciousnesses are responsive but uncomprehending.

The cosmos we perceive is beautiful. And hideous. Foul and splenderous beyond the childish explanations our naive minds can muster. And what we can understand links all things. Its fabric is interwoven with the Group Mind. Or, rather, what it will have become in a divergent and distant chronological span. And baffling us, at both its beginning and its end.

Already we begin to bridge the galaxies. Our Collective crosses the intergalactic distances of space and time. We find wild calamities of destruction like those in our own Milky Way. The fires of worlds consuming themselves in immaturity. The madness of burgeoning sentients clashing across star systems. The mammoth tragedies of broken vagaries in evolution. Yet so many of their minds come to us. We absorb them, learn of and from them, and are enhanced.

Now we detect the stirrings of transcendent mentalities not unlike our own. Lesser, in discord, requiring help to survive their own internal disruptions. Tens of thousands of galactic intelligences reach toward us through the endless continuum. A time will come in the successive eons when we will meet and a greater Whole emerge.

And always, there are the Anti. Hidden even from us. Unmaking. Incomprehensible. Seeking the self-contradictory goal, the paradox of creative destruction. A shadowy premonition convinces us some transformative event lies in a shared future with them. An ascendancy where and when the cosmos will be changed, and our Mind, undone.

In all things, we ceaselessly orbit our Daughter of Time.

Although a part of a more expansive whole, she is the nexus. Her mentality is the nucleation center, the core particle around which this congregation has crystallized. She is the mother of all we have become, a goddess in labor, forever giving birth to this new Being.

But more than a mere goddess to me.

For me, she is still the woman I am doomed to love. The light I followed from the day my consciousness coalesced. And for a short, blissful time on New Earth and in the heavens, she was my beloved.

Always and ever my dearest, Ambra Dawn.

It is all a matter of time scale. An event that would be unthinkable in a hundred years may be inevitable in a hundred million.

Carl Sagan's Cosmos

Afterward: Writer

Truth is a pathless land.

Jiddu Krishnamurti

When I began this series (then only conceived as a single novel), I wanted to write a "superheroine" book for my (then) middle school-aged daughters, the story of a "girl that saves the universe." What began as something with a strong YA flavor in the initial drafts, quickly turned darker. In addition, the ideas percolating in the first novel, *Reader*, cried out for a follow-up. Hence, *Writer* and *Maker* were conceived.

With this trilogy, I was interested in exploring certain themes and ideas from a variety of science fiction authors and modern cosmology, trying to find my own "mythology" to harmonize some of the disparate conceptions of reality percolating through human discourse. Ideas surrounding the subjectivity and limitations of human perception and understanding played important roles, as did ideas of causality, time, superstructure, divinity, and infinity.

Whereas *Reader* was written very organically (and metamor-

phosed from a YA novel to something quite different), *Writer* was more carefully plotted, involving several arcs of plot and character and complexities between many personalities that required more organization.

It was a risk to change the first person voice from Ambra Dawn in *Reader* to her lover, Nitin Ratava, in *Writer*. Indeed, both this change in perspective and the very different structure to the novel and character interactions, put a number of readers off. However, it also has been some readers' favorite novel of the three. Beyond subjectivity, there was a practical consideration of Ambra's powers and painting myself into an artistic corner with that, as well as a key element of the plot that called for a different perspective.

Finally, the ending of *Writer* challenges readers who have invested in Ambra's story. While difficult, it opens the door to something far more transcendent, wrestling with many deep questions for which no one has any solid answers. But the questions are as illuminating, or more so, than simplistic dogma about the universe that poisons so much intellectual exploration. That ending then leads to the third book, *Maker*, where things get truly odd, indeed.

My creative activities have certainly tested the patience of many in my small circle of life. While such efforts are not necessarily to the taste of everyone, for those who have shown me grace and support, my heartfelt thanks are due and I gladly give it.

I am also touched by the readers and reviewers who have expressed such affection for one (and sometimes several!) of the novels of this trilogy, especially those who have responded with feelings and ideas that reflect in some deep way those elements within myself that engendered this series.

This tale was bigger than any one character, perspective, or voice; and while part of the divergence between novels was intentional to shake both the writer and the reader out of their comfort

zone, the larger truth is that the voices of the characters came and spoke to me in the manner recorded, and I simply wrote down what they said.

I hope that in some other reality, their memory is eternal, and we might meet again.

Erec Stebbins

Acknowledgments

Love is not a reaction. If I love you because you love me, that is mere trade, a thing to be bought in the market.

Jiddu Krishnamurti

I would first like to thank Ambra, Nitin, and Waythrel, without whom these novels would not have existed. That they chose me as the writer to tell their impossible story is humbling and touching. I have done my best to tell it right, but know that I have failed in the ways they convey in the text. Forgive my limitations, my dear friends, and I hope we meet again outside my head.

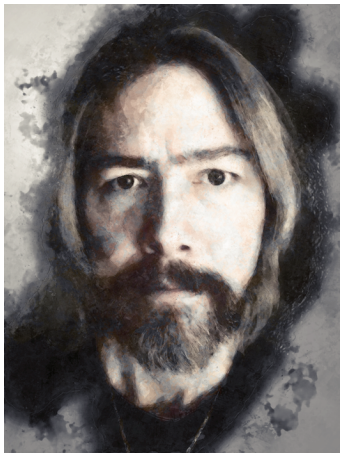
Thanks to those who supported the writing of the books during my self-publishing years. I had faint hope this odd narrative would interest many, and the failure of my first published thriller to sell convinced me (and publishers) that I was not marketable. During those years it was a struggle to put down the words that compose this trilogy. My deepest gratitude to those who instead provided encouragement.

And lastly, for those who are not with me, your love, your dreams, and your spirit will always be. If not in this life, or this world, perhaps in others, amongst other stars and innumerable galaxies, in universes uncounted and reborn.

Forever I remain, a stargazer.

Erec Stebbins, December 2025

About the Author



Erec Stebbins, 2022

Erec Stebbins is a biomedical researcher who writes thrillers and science fiction. He was born in the Midwest, his mother a clinical psychologist and his father a professor of Romance languages. His father's specialty is the source of the unusual spelling of his middle name, taken from knight in an Arthurian romance: *Érec et Énide*.

He has pursued diverse interests over the course of his life, including science, music, drama, and writing. His academic path focused on science, and he received a degree in physics from Oberlin College in 1992, and a PhD in biochemistry from Cornell University in 1999. He has worked for several decades studying the structure of biological macromolecules involved in disease.